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May 1st, 2009

Russell's Letter of Pastoral Transition

"In fact, everyone who has left his homes, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." Matt 19:29 (ISV)

It was the spring of 2000, a beautiful, rainy time of year in the Northwest. I had been working on the staff of a Foursquare church in Mill Creek, WA, and I was thoroughly enjoying the day-to-day operations of my assignment; conversations with young people, coordinating missions trips to China and Central America, and learning how to become a more effective teacher from the pulpit. Ministry was good, life was good, but it was to be out of that routine that the Lord would speak very suddenly to me. I have only had what I would classify as a "vision" given to me on two occasions in my life. The first preceded my re-conversion to Christianity, and the second would signal my departure to the east coast.

Following a brief conversation with another staff member, I was sitting alone in one of the offices thinking about the rest of my day. We had been joking together over a friend of ours who had recently announced his desire to begin a church work in the Boston area. I had no sooner finished my rather dismissive comments than the second of the aforementioned visions came to me. It was a simple picture; that of packed cardboard boxes being transported. The picture resonated with scripture that I had been recently reading and with a previous word of direction from a respected leader. It didn't then take much effort to discern that the boxes were mine and that they were headed for Boston! I began to weep. I knew that my life had just changed forever.

"My sheep know my voice," the Bible says, and although I've never professed any kind of direct line to the Father, I knew this was God's way of speaking to me. He was directing me to leave the Northwest, to say good-bye to my family (Grandparents, Father, Mother, brother, sister, my nieces and future nephews), and to move to a place where I knew no one at all. The closest I had ever been to Massachusetts was the state of Florida! (Not exactly Red Sox country.)

In time, God gave me a tremendous team of folks eager to follow Jesus to New England on the adventure of a lifetime. The RiCharde family, the Schiefer family, and Ream family were some of the 19 individuals who served tirelessly to make certain that the Cambridge/Boston Foursquare Church would succeed. Truth be told, without those key families, I would have never stayed, as it would have been far too difficult to pioneer this work alone. We would grow to become Grace Street Church and would find our home in Harvard Square.

It's been nearly nine years now since I left Everett, Washington, and almost exactly eight years to the week that we had our first church service at Old Cambridge Baptist. Oh, what God has done! Grace Street is as strong as it has ever been. The Elders, the Council, the Lay Leaders, and the general congregation are thriving and steadfastly ready for their next assignment from the Lord. We have so many young people being discipled and allowing the Lord to grow and utilize their giftings for the advancement of His Kingdom. Year after year, Grace Street sends out graduates to all parts of the world and year after year the Lord replaces them with new, eager students and young professionals to step into ministry right back here in Cambridge. It's truly an amazing cycle.

Few would have thought that this kind of ministry was possible in this particular context. It is scripture, however, that tells us that God uses the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. The non-educated son of a dockworker has been given the honor of pastoring some of the brightest and most talented young people in the world for the last nine

years. I have served as Chaplain to Harvard University for six years. I have presided over commencements with Nobel Laureates and former U.S. Presidents. And I now count among my friends MIT PhD's, Harvard professors, and world-renown theologians.

However wonderful and affirming those gifts have been, they cannot for a moment compare to what I hold the most dear to my heart: My family and my congregation. I met my wife, Ana Maria, here and we had all three of our children in Cambridge. God has blessed me with a woman who loves me on my good and my bad days, and with children that I continually stare at thinking, "Do they really belong to me?" And I have been privileged to have shepherded the most sincere and caring group of people that I have ever known. They painted our apartments (several times), they moved us, fed us, took care of our children, sat through a few terrible sermons, laughed at my jokes, and challenged me to become the best pastor that I can be. They have grown to become a part of our hearts, and have become our family. It is to that community that I now write these words of departure and promise: The Schlecht family has received a new assignment from the Lord and we are transitioning Grace Street to its next leader.

Grace Street Church is to grow under a new Pastor, and we are to move to the Oak Harbor, Washington Foursquare Church and assume the Senior Pastorate there. It has been through prayer and consultation with people that we respect that we have arrived at this decision, and we do not for a moment make it lightly. We love this city and its people, and God knows that, but He also knows that we have taken Grace Street as far as we can, and that there is another shepherd who is to come and move this church into its next season in God. Likewise, we are called now to be the family to move the Oak Harbor church into the next place that God has for them. Our last service with Grace Street will be on May 23, a Saturday night, and my last official act as Pastor will be to preside at Harvard's June 4, 2009 commencement.

Our denomination is doing a wonderful job of orchestrating the transition. Conversations are ongoing between our Council, Elders, and the New England Foursquare District Supervisor, Jim Scott. God has shown himself to be gracious and sovereign throughout the entire process. There is not a shred of doubt in my heart that Grace Street is headed in the right direction, and the Council and Elders have confirmed their commitment to your future! You are covered by their care until you have a new shepherd.

Nine years ago, I left "homes, brothers, sisters, a father, a mother, and children" only to see God fill my life with a new family and a beautiful ministry. Today, we say good-bye knowing that our hearts will not shrink from loss, but will only expand to engraft the additional people that God will bring in. For us, that means the people of Oak Harbor. And for you, that means a new Pastor!

We love you, Grace Street. May God bless your future, and may your latter days truly be greater than your former!

With sincere gratitude,



Russ Schlecht and family
Senior Pastor, Grace Street Church (April 2001-June 2009)
Harvard Chaplain (2003-2009)

