

Introduction

I'm very thankful to Dr. Ralph Blair for asking me to provide a talk for Evangelicals Concerned's (EC's) 2024 connECtion. Dr. Blair, or Ralph, is a significant person in my life. I met Ralph several years before I moved to New York in 1988. Not only has he mentored me spiritually, but he also helped me psychologically, and nurtured me in how to view the world.

So, what does one do when one is asked by Ralph Blair to share for an EC connECtion? The first thing is to say yes, which I did. The second optional thing is to go into an irrational panic, which I did (sorry Ralph!). The third is to procrastinate. And finally, the fourth is to work out what to say.

I decided to focus on my journey and thoughts about faith and the church. Who I am today is the result of where and how I grew up, my education, my Christian faith, and where I am now. I think of it as my pilgrimage.

I have volunteered in churches and with parachurch organizations in various ways since I was in high school. I worked in campus ministry with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (InterVarsity or IV) and served in lay leadership roles in several churches. So, essentially, I'm a layperson who became a Christian as a teenager and have spent my life working and serving as I am able in a Christian community where I can worship and grow. What I can talk about is my journey, what I have observed, how I see the church now, and my thoughts about the future.

A pilgrim's progress

A few years after coming to New York, I began attending Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church when Dr. R. Maurice Boyd was senior minister. His preaching style was that of a pulpiteer, a lost art. More importantly he preached grace. It was from Dr. Boyd's preaching, I really heard for the first time a consistent message of God's grace. Eventually I served as a governing board member in the last church he served, The City Church, New York. He preached the love of the Father in Jesus citing well known Christian poets, writers and thinkers, and was able to not only preach the gospel but help fellow pilgrims be brought into the story. Loving New York, he usually built his sermon around what brought us to the City: poetry, music, opera, art, theater. He preached at "a slant" meaning he spoke about something that brings you to a point that you can hear the truth of God's grace.

He often spoke about our life as pilgrims and strangers passing through the wilderness and that this earth is not our home. In his words: "*Here we are but strangers and pilgrims. In the Land of Promise, in the Country of the Great King, we shall be at home.*"

In one of his sermons, from the early 1990's, Dr. Boyd quoted from John Bunyan's book, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*". Written in 1678 it is still in print. Early on in this allegory of a pilgrim Bunyan writes:

"Then said Evangelist (pointing with his finger over a very wide field), "Do you see yonder wicket-gate?" The man (*Pilgrim*) said, "No." Then said the other, "Do you see yonder shining light?" He said, "I think I do." Then said Evangelist, "Keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto; so shalt thou see the gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do."

That quote struck me, and keeping that shining light of Jesus in my eye has been the guide for me ever since. Saved through God's gracious redeeming love in Jesus, keep your eyes and mind on that light.

My pilgrimage begins

I am from Minnesota and grew up in small towns. The towns we lived in were populated mostly with families of German, Norwegian, and Swedish descent. It was all about farming.

Minnesota is also home to well-known companies like 3M, General Mills, Cargill, Hormel Foods Corporation, Target Corporation, Best Buy, and the world-famous Mayo Clinic. Minnesota produced a significant portion of the world's iron ore for over a century. The port of Duluth on Lake Superior was created by the mining boom and today continues to be an important shipping port for the Midwest's agricultural and ore products. The first indoor mall was built in suburban Minneapolis in 1958 and the largest indoor mall in the world, Mall of America, opened in 1992. And the big one for me is that when I was young, we got Mary Tyler Moore as one of our own starting in 1970!

When I was young in the 1950's and 1960's everyone went to church. My family was Catholic, and our relatives were mainly Catholic or Lutheran. Church was an important part of life. It wasn't a drudge but rather grounding and comforting. We moved several times during my youth which taught me how to meet new people, even though I consider myself shy.

My father was a tradesman. My mother was a homemaker who was at home for me and my sister through my grade school years before getting part time jobs. I enjoyed the things that a modest upbringing provides. I never attended a parochial school but regularly attended religious education. My teachers – both nuns and lay people – were gentle, kind, and supportive. Our parish priests were good and faithful.

My pilgrimage moves outside of the home

In high school I joined the parish youth choir which sang at the 11:00 Sunday morning “guitar mass”. The director at the time I joined welcomed many kids from high school and young adults. We sang contemporary music from the post-Vatican 2 world of church music and our director's husband, the local Catholic high school band director, provided some harmonizations that were easy to sing and beautiful to listen to. Not limited to just contemporary music we also learned classics like “The Hallelujah Chorus” sung at Christmas and “Were You There?” at Easter. We averaged 40-50 youth on a Sunday and the 11:00 mass, one of six each weekend, was popular with about 800 regular attendees.

Not only did our director teach us music, but she was also concerned about our spiritual development. She organized several retreats for us. The second retreat was held in our church school with volunteer staff from the St. Paul Catholic Youth Center leading the weekend (St. Paul is home to the Catholic archdiocese). There easily were 70+ of us attending with the penultimate event guiding us to commit our lives to Christ. In evangelical terms, I had consciously committed my life to Christ and the Catholic worship experience reinforced it weekly. When she moved, the choir director who followed was a local teacher and someone who became a good friend. She carried on the tradition of encouraging us and sought funding that allowed us to try new things like producing Easter plays and making a recording of us singing.

Pilgrimage towards a deeper faith

My parents both attended post-secondary schools though neither graduated. When I said I wanted to attend college they supported me. I could live at home rent free but paid my own modest college tuition through part time jobs. During my second year, I took a general business course and met a woman who had volunteered at the same Catholic Youth Center that held the retreat a few years earlier. At the end of that academic year she suggested I would be a good candidate to lead a commuter Bible Study since I didn't live on campus, and gave me the name of someone in the local InterVarsity (IV) chapter to contact when we returned in the fall. When school restarted, I went to the first IV chapter meeting. Although she didn't return

to school that fall, she had given my name to several folks who welcomed me in. I began to mature through the fellowship, teaching, and trainings. There I met and have continued my friendship with this year's other connECtion speaker, Jean Klee.

As I became more involved, I eventually served on the Executive Committee, the student leadership team of the local chapter, and was selected chapter president. I chose to extend my undergraduate studies by one year to allow more focus on the IV chapter with my parents blessing. Our chapter was small but active and had good relations with other campus Christian groups like Campus Crusade and The Navigators. Chapter members attended local Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal and Catholic churches close to campus. I continued attending my neighborhood Catholic Church and led singing at an early Sunday morning mass. During the rest of my college years, I attended conferences and several summer camps focusing on discipleship and evangelism.

A pilgrimage to serve

I was drawn to the work of the greater church. God was our Father and I wanted to please Him, yet it was impossible to do everything. After graduation, I attended an IV summer evangelism project in Colorado.

After that summer I got a local job and became a volunteer IV staff worker, first working at my alma mater and then on the Iron Range in northern Minnesota with students attending community colleges in Virginia and Hibbing. I then served for a year as a volunteer staff worker in Minneapolis at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD) affiliated with the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. I covered my living expenses by working in restaurants or retail.

During that year in Minneapolis, I took the small chapter at MCAD to a screening of the IV award-winning multi-media production of Habakkuk. Habakkuk is an Old Testament minor prophet written in beautiful poetry. The evangelistic roadshow blew me away. The 50+ minute production used the entire text of Habakkuk's book and asked questions about evil, injustice, and God's perceived inactivity. After seeing Habakkuk I spoke with my former college friends and decided to apply to become an IVCF staff worker for the media division of IV, MMC Productions. I remember filling out the application and the question about homosexuality. Still not "out" to myself, I answered the question "correctly". I interviewed and was hired.

Pilgrimage as a "professional" Christian

I moved to IV's headquarters in Madison, WI in August 1981. I was tasked with raising my own support like many parachurch organizations require. Normally alumni from one's own IVCF chapter could provide a significant boost, but that small IV chapter had produced four of us in a few short years called to work for IV. We all were seeking support from the same small pool. Being one of four looking for support from our local chapter and still being Catholic (Catholics are not used to supporting protestant campus organizations) meant I was never very successful in reaching my fundraising target.

I served two years touring throughout the continental United States with Habakkuk and two more years working with colleges and universities to schedule the production and attend camps to be a resource for students wanting to do evangelism. As far as I know there are no original visuals nor an original soundtrack available anymore but a revised soundtrack after an update in the later 1980s is available on the IV website.

Touring with an evangelistic roadshow had a lasting impact on me. I lived out of a suitcase for two years. I slept wherever they gave me a bed. I lived in noisy dorm rooms, slept in vacated beds or on floors, in spare bedrooms of families who supported the work of IV on the local campus, a couple times in beautiful family condos, and once on, what I realized was the dog's bed in the living room. Students often expected our team to do the work that only they, the students, could do – develop friendships outside of their Christian circle

and be willing to have discussions. Habakkuk did a phenomenal job of using the predictable questions about injustice and what God was doing in the world showing through history that God is in control.

Habakkuk went from doubt to faith and through his struggle declared his faith in God no matter what would come. And what would come for him, was the eventual destruction of Jerusalem and being taken into captivity by the Babylonians. The production pointed viewers to see how their questions lead to Jesus Christ using powerful images and an excellent soundtrack. Our tour team would introduce the show and conclude it by asking viewers to respond in several ways using a feedback form – be contacted for follow-up, show interest in a Bible Study, or make a commitment to Jesus. It is humbling to watch God work in this way. And just like that we would move on to the next campus.

Through the wilderness of later IV years and graduate school

Towards the end of my second year on tour I finally acknowledged I was gay. I came out to myself but I never told anyone for a while. I was in Austin, TX on a tour break and looked for books I could read. I found several but one stood out and had a strong impact. Sylvia Pennington wrote the book *“But Lord They’re Gay”* in 1982. The book chronicled her own pilgrimage from starting out wanting to convert “the gays” in the San Francisco Tenderloin district and ending up being changed herself. Simply put, when she saw God working in and through Christian gay men who were working with other gay men, she asked herself, “Why would God hate people He is clearly working through?” She concluded God didn’t hate them and it changed her.

When I returned to IV headquarters, several folks commented on how they perceived I had really matured in the Lord. Thinking of Sylvia Pennington, I asked myself, does God hate me, when others see Him working in me? I concluded no, He doesn’t hate me for being gay. I thought about leaving but continued working at IV for another two years before departing to go back to school. After coming out, I only told two people at IV that I was gay.

Ms. Pennington had included some resources in the back of her book. One of them was Dr. Ralph Blair and Evangelicals Concerned, Inc. in New York City. It wouldn’t be long before a connection was made, and I met other gay Christians and the founder, Dr. Ralph Blair. Dr. Blair had started Evangelicals Concerned, Inc. in 1970’s.

A friend and I started a local EC chapter in Madison, WI and I began attending annual conferences where we heard Dr. Blair and several other speakers each year. Theologians, ministers, and lay people have spoken over the years. The common thread found in all the speakers was the understanding that scripture does not condemn homosexuals and God does not require homosexuals to change. There are numerous talks and papers available on the ecinc.org website laying this out.

By the time I left IV I had spent almost six years working as a volunteer campus worker or with Habakkuk. I decided to study international business at Thunderbird School of Global Management, a graduate school in Arizona that I had visited while on tour. After a year and a half of intensive study I graduated in the spring of 1988 into a world that wouldn’t fully recover from the October 1987 Stock Market Crash for quite a few more years. There were few jobs available and at 31, I was significantly older than the next crop of recent graduates.

Following yonder light via New York City

With few job prospects and unsure what to do, I traveled cross-country to New York (NYC) to interview for a job. EC was headquartered there, and I had met several guys from NYC on a retreat earlier in the summer, so I knew a Christian community. And I believed my studies in international management were relevant in

the financial capital of the U.S. After arriving I went to the job interview the Friday before Labor Day Weekend and was offered it. I spent Labor Day Weekend trying to convince myself to accept it but, in the end, admitted I knew it was not a good fit. The day after Labor Day, I declined the job offer and by the end of the week found a job working as a temp employee in the NYC finance industry. Like countless others before me, I had started my work life in New York.

Now retired, I must say I was blessed in my work life. Not every job was easy nor the next step clear, but I was challenged and grew from each one. I was fortunate to work with some fantastic people, learn from them, and be challenged by them. Throughout my work career, I stayed in fellowship with other Christians.

Although I haven't been a member of a church my entire time in NYC, I do believe in communal Christian worship and being part of a Christian community is important. I can pray and worship God on my own, but think of that as what we do when we can't find a worshipping community. Worship focuses on the proactive and redeeming love of God through the sacrificial death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. I need it every week. I am moved, called to repentance, refreshed, and comforted by that message.

There have been times I thought the real Christian church must be a rare thing. I would go to churches that didn't believe in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus or believed the work of the church is to baptize the agenda of a social cause or political party. If the gospel is for everyone, shouldn't it be simple and straightforward to communicate? Why was it so hard? Before finding my current church home I kept repeating, "if it's good news why is it so hard to preach?"

All through this I attended the regular Friday night Bible Study lead by Ralph Blair, went on retreats and visited various churches. I attended Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church the last few years Dr. Boyd was senior minister. For the 5 years after Dr. Boyd left that church, I didn't attend anywhere regularly. When he was called to The City Church, New York I joined and stayed for 10 years until it ended. I then attended Redeemer Presbyterian Church for almost 10 years and now I've been at my current church for over 7 years. It is a vibrant Episcopal Church where I believe God is doing great things.

Calvary-St. George's Episcopal church is an historic Episcopal church that preaches the gospel. Seven years ago, I was invited by a friend to a Sunday service. The clergy were away leading a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the seminarian preached. And he preached the gospel! I had attended many churches where ordained and more senior clergy seemed to be having a hard time communicating it. The service was led and prayed by those who embraced and believed the wonderful liturgy steeped in Christian truths. I was excited and I committed to coming back to make sure it was real. Happily, this church preaches the grace of the gospel and I have never turned back. I was ready to embrace the richness of the worship it allows and the truths in its prayers.

It's now clear to me that it's not that the gospel is hard to preach, it's that clergy in churches are not preaching the gospel. Like always, we think we know what God wants and we try to please Him. We will put our own spin on the message or speak to what we think may be more important, more relevant, more topical, more hip, or the next steps we must take.

The church is for pilgrims

We are all strangers and pilgrims on this earth. We are passing through and not even death will keep us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Pray for, find, and support, a church where the gospel message of the grace of God in Jesus Christ is preached.

¹⁶ So the eleven disciples went to Galilee to the mountain Jesus had designated. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came up and said to them, "All authority in heaven

and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28 16-20 “The Great Commission” from the *New English Translation*

The church has been called to be the church with a unique mission. God is working all over the place, through all kinds of faithful women and men, in all kinds of churches to fulfill the great commission.

As I continue my Christian pilgrimage, I understand and see more and more that God was, is, and will always be the proactive agent. He is the protagonist. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the Hound of Heaven that seeks us out. Because He is always active, I pray and thank Him for His continuous work to renew, rebuild, and reform His church on earth. May we accept his generous love and knowing how much we’ve been forgiven, welcome others into the Christian family.

“I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me” (19th century hymn, Anonymous).

God has forgiven us in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It was accomplished already. Done. Believe and be baptized!

I’ll end with this. Last year a friend asked me what he should say to a gay friend who wanted to know about going to an affirming church.

I have attended several affirming churches. There are a lot of them in New York and I have walked by them. But I’ve concluded they go with the idea we are all OK but not because Jesus died for us. They are affirming a social agenda. I don’t want a church that is affirming anything. I want, no, I need a church that is proclaiming the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I need a church that believes that Jesus is Lord and savior. A church that is focusing on preaching the law free gospel knows we all have fallen short and are welcomed as children and heirs into His kingdom. Most likely that church will not be paying attention to your political affiliation, whether you are gay or straight, white, brown or black, rich or poor.

So, I answered that he should tell him he doesn’t need an “affirming church”, but rather he needs a church that preaches Jesus and the law-free gospel. The love and forgiveness through Jesus is what we all need. God has already forgiven us. It was accomplished. Done. Believe and be baptized!

By Steven Schimmele