

Matt Frizzell
A Message to Chicago Mission Center
Friday, January 30, 2009

It's been almost a year since I accepted this call to serve as Chicago mission center president. For many reasons, both personal and spiritual, it was a daunting call to accept.

These last ten months have been filled with new experiences for me. I've received several testimonies along the way, as well as learned a lot personally. Everywhere I go in Chicago mission center I find remarkable people devoted to their congregations, devoted to their Savior, and to the church. You are a remarkable people because together, you continue to face unprecedented challenges. As you know, many congregations struggle to find ways to reach young people. In addition, there are important pastoral needs to attend to amongst our existing members. Jesus' metaphor was correct. We are a flock, and everyone is called to shepherd with the gifts that have been given to them. No matter what the situation, each challenge presents a new opportunity. For Christ comes to us, bringing both comfort as well as, a crisis at time. , Each challenge is an opportunity to be open to the Holy Spirit and consider what God is doing.

Let the Spirit lead.

As this last year came to a close, I realized the privilege I have to see Chicago Mission Center from my unique vantage point. There certainly are very few who have the opportunity to travel the mission center like I do. I get to see each congregation – and appreciate all their commonalities and differences. I get to see how each of you faces situations and challenges not unlike those written about in our very scriptures. Think about it. Just like the New Testament, Chicago mission center has congregations in the heart of urban centers, as well as those on the rural country side. Like it is written in the Gospels, I get to hear about how lives are broken, as well as lives that are reborn when individuals are confronted by Christ and those folks hear the call to ministry. Like Jacob,

I know pastors and leaders who wrestle with God through the night. Like Israel, itself, I see entire congregations are being tried as they wonder in the wilderness. Our mission center has congregations just like the ones Paul wrote to in his letters, who are struggling with interpersonal conflicts as well as puzzling over what Christ's death and resurrection really mean. I don't know anyone who isn't challenged by the freedom Christ has grants us, or who doesn't long for a vibrant witness.

After ten months traveling within Chicago Mission Center, I've been reminded how we live in scriptural times. The challenges we face, as well as the hope we live by, come in the same proportions as they do in the gospel. The story of faith and challenge told about in our scriptures is told again and again through the way Christ meets us in our own particular circumstances. Christ comes, sometimes bringing comfort, and sometimes crisis. In one congregation, I know of a priesthood member who's drifted away - frustrated with the church and searching for spiritual direction. In another, I offer the prayer in the ordination of a man whose testifies that God found him while doing drugs in his garage. In another, a young woman I know is ordained while she struggles with cancer. And, in yet another situation, I weep with a man in a hospital because the community found in the church has brought us together and its healing power has rested upon us in prayer.

Whether in crisis or finding comfort or being commissioned, the stories that make up Chicago Mission Center are the same ones being told in the witness of our scriptures.

One of the most rewarding parts of my job is the privilege I have to travel to each of your congregations and share in ministry. Like very few others, I get to experience how Chicago Mission Center is like a Community of Christ, in all its similarities and differences. Take worship, for example. In DeKalb, I'll sing one Sunday along with Roger's guitar. At Bourbonnais another Sunday, I'll sing some of my favorite hymns as the piano plays. On yet another Sunday, I'll be at Brainerd stomping my feet and singing in full voice in praise. At Highland, on another Sunday, I will sing with the hymns steadily amidst the harmonies of a church organ. In the following week, I may find

myself at Elgin where there is both a traditional and a contemporary service, one for those who prefer the more familiar traditional hymns and another for members who like to sing to the beat of speakers and sing with their hands raised.

I also get to see our rich diversity of ministry. At OnEdge, young adults gather at least once a month, some times for 6 hours, under the simple conviction that no matter who you are, you belong. Some face addiction while others are recovering from rejection by other Christian communities. At Streator, people from the community know the church because Streator has opened the doors of the church for use in the community. Grand children participate in the worship services there. At First Chicago and Lombard, homeless and hungry members of the surrounding community either receive a meal or assistance with basic necessities once or twice a month. Brainerd has had several baptisms this year and its annual block party. Members of Libertyville Community of Christ participated heavily in sharing their spiritual gifts at the Spirit Arise Retreat this fall. Highland has also increased its fellowship activities as well as attendance to Adult Sunday School because Joyce Lewis has been innovative in her approach to teaching. DeKalb maintains a warm and welcoming Spirit at its Adult Sunday School.

And think about this. Mission and Plano are two of the oldest established congregations in the Community of Christ, going back to the 1800's. While OnEdge and Lakeview are two of the newest and unique expressions of our Community of Christ faith. Each, in their unique way, express a Spirit of openness and commitment to belonging that reflects Christ's love and sense of community. Elgin has been innovative completing several preaching series this year, and successfully transitioned to two services. In Bourbonnais, Marvin and Alice Jones, along with the help of the Savages, have courageously continued church services every week despite health challenges. Several members across the Mission Center, including members who use to go to Flossmoor, travel on the Mission Center preaching schedule supporting other congregations in sharing their ministry.

Chicago Mission Center is an alive and active community!

And, we can't forget our most successful events this year. Kevin and Robin Hendrickson, as well as Chrissy Pugh and other young adults lead several weeks of summer camps, Sports Spectacular, and retreats for Senior and Junior High Youth, as well as elementary aged children this year. I still hear the testimonies of youth and their parents about the impact of their ministry and the quality of the spiritual experiences they have at Camp Quarryledge. For dozens of unseen young people, Quarryledge is their spiritual home. We also had the Women's Retreat this year. Bill Howard from Elgin, Debbie Clark from Libertyville, Gayle Parker from Lombard, as well as many others, helped make Spirit Arise an important event this year, which drew well over 60 members in attendance. Family Camp, under Robin Hendrickson's leadership, had also a couple days where over 60 members came. And we ended the year with the Christmas Gala at Camp Quarryledge. Led by Pam Ross, over 70 grand parents, parents, young adults and youth closed out 2008 celebrating Jesus' birthday with caroling and an appreciation dinner for the leaders of Chicago Mission Center.

I cannot thank any of you enough, nor can I praise God enough. Chicago Mission Center and its congregations has had a remarkable year.

As I look toward 2009, which we're already in, I'm mindful that hope is realized in small manageable, but faithful steps. There are congregations that will continue into a future that is much like the present. However, they face the same challenge as those that do not. No matter the situation, the scriptures are clear that Christ meets us in our circumstance, bringing us both comfort and a crisis at times. The church will live on by the witness of its congregations and the faith of those who believe in Christ's promise.

What is your testimony?

I challenge each of you this year to pray about it, to write down and rewrite it. Tell it, and finally, live it.

Congregations, as well as the entire church, live and die in both obvious and unexpected ways, through the sharing of these testimonies. Each congregation, no matter how big or how small, is surrounded by faith's opportunities. Whether witnessing to new beginnings or striving to leave a legacy, God's will for our lives right now is found deep within in our hearts and its deepest yearnings.

What do you hear God saying?