

“Aware, Repair, Renew”

January 31, 2021
John 14: selected verses

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United Virtual Church

Reflections on the 14th Anniversary of Celebrate Life evening service.

Pastor Doug Warren had been working at this church for about a year when he realized he had never been down to the Scout Room. Now we haven't had a Scout group in years and years. Then, as now, the primary users of the space have been Alcoholics Anonymous. So Doug decided to wander down the stairs one day and see what it looked like.

This is how Doug described what he experienced: *“I couldn't believe it. Frankly, I was aghast. It smelled. From the days when smoking was permitted, the ceiling was stained nicotine yellow, and the residual odour still lingered. The walls were a dirty institutional green, and hadn't seen a brush-stroke in decades.”*

After some conversation, Pastor Doug and a small crew decided that a simple way of saying to the people who met there: “You are welcome here!” would be to clean, paint and freshen up the room. When the room



was ready to be used again, Pastor Doug welcomed an AA meeting into the space and told them that their presence mattered and they were welcome. The room was renamed “Serenity Hall”.

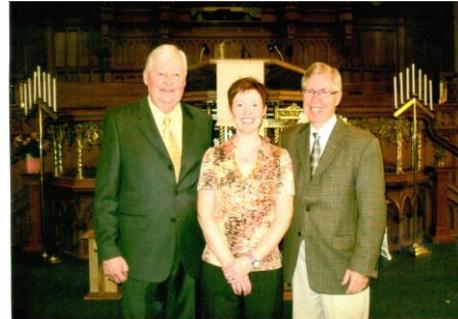
This is the Sunday we celebrate the 14th Anniversary of our evening service, Celebrate Life. Celebrate Life (CL) is a casual but holy worship service that has a special heart for people with “hurts, habits, and hang-ups”. It has a special focus on Recovery.

Our church's relationship to people in Recovery from drugs and alcohol goes back about 4 years before the start of Celebrate Life to the early 2000's. Inspired by Leadership conferences at the Crystal Cathedral; Rev. Doug Warren and my father, Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett, had the vision of reaching out to people who were not currently attending worship.

The early 2000's was a time when this church really began to change its sense of purpose and mission. On the surface there was nothing wrong with the traditional way Wall Street functioned as a church. However, the writing was on the wall for the entire denomination and all Canadian mainline churches.

Younger generations, once they got married and had kids, were not coming back to church the way they used to. My father Alan, Doug, and others knew that if the church was going to survive into the future, it would need to remember its true purpose as a church of Jesus, reaching out to all ages with that transforming love.

My father called those times “the glory days”.



It was challenging time — but also the highlight of his ministry career. He was working with Pastor Doug and Pastor Stewart Froese, with music director Catherine Oxenford-Grant, and with key lay leaders like board chair, Lisa Axworthy and treasurer, Ken Lacey. There were others too and together they discerned a vision of what God wanted this church to be — a place of deep and inclusive faith; that cared about and reached out to those who were beyond the walls.

Together, Pastor Doug and the others had a God-sparked idea to start reaching out to the 100 or so people who came to church every week but did not come to the worship service. Wall Street, like so, so many churches had been renting space to Alcoholics Anonymous for a nominal fee, and Doug wondered if the church could make a connection to these folks. That’s what led him down the stairs to see their meeting room. That’s what led the church to get their paint brushes out.

Pastor Doug remembers when he first met another key person in the story. It was evening, probably a Wednesday and he was wearing his clerical collar. As he went down towards the main entryway, a friendly guy came up the stairs with a piece of chocolate cake on a paper plate. “Hi Father,” he said, “would you like some cake?” The friendly guy was Danny Mocibob. Danny was a resident of Brock Cottage at the time – a long-term recovery home for men trying to beat their addictions. Doug and Danny formed a great friendship and Danny became a key link between the congregation and the recovery community.

14 years ago, a team of 4 people: Danny Mocibob, Joe Martelle, Jean Smith, and Irene Warren travelled on their own dime to Central United

Church in Calgary to learn how to do a Celebrate Life Recovery service. Those four, along with Pastor Doug, started the evening service. Other shifts were happening at the same time. Music was a huge part of that shift. A band was formed for the evening service that would occasionally play in addition to the organ on Sunday mornings.

It all began with a desire to reach out with God's love. They wanted to reach out and make a difference — but no one at the time realized just how much life would come back in and how much the whole church would change and find renewal from the relationship.

A year ago, I started on the journey of looking into doing a Doctorate of Ministry in preaching. When you do a doctorate, you have to have a topic that you want to explore that relates specifically to your own context. I knew that I wanted to do something related to how our congregation has been affected by our close relationship with people in Recovery from drugs and alcohol. So this year, one of my goals has been to integrate into my preaching the primary movements of the Recovery Community's 12-step program: *awareness, reparation and renewed action*. In other words, I would like to see how the Recovery ministry might deepen the faith of our whole congregation.

Aware Repair Renew

In the 12 Steps, we are encouraged to be **aware** of God (or our higher power) and God's ability to save and restore our sanity. We are also led to be aware of our own brokenness and powerlessness. Many of us are either living in denial of our flaws, or probably more often are too aware of short-comings and live in shame; doing all we can to forget the past. The 12 steps invite us to really look at ourselves and to take a 'fearless inventory' of the places we messed up in the past.

This is so necessary. Nothing will keep you from growing and becoming fully who you are created to be, more than being in denial about it or not being aware of your sin and brokenness. And, on the other extreme, there is nothing that will destroy you faster than shame. Being aware of and bringing that brokenness out into the open is hugely healing and important. That's a big reason why at AA meetings the speaker tells their story. Bringing the pain and shame into the presence of the light and a supportive community is hugely healing.

This is one of the biggest shifts that I have seen in our church. One of the gifts that the Recovery community has brought the regular churchgoers is the permission to share our own brokenness and imperfections. We are all carrying loads of pain and shame, and as a church we need to create a

safe enough space so we can be honest about our brokenness, and lovingly support one another.

Because the Recovery community was so candid about their failings and hurts, habits and hang-ups, others in the church couldn't help but say: "That's me too." Church is not a place for shiny, perfect people, but more like a hospital for sick people where we are both the nurses and the patients—both the caregivers and the ones being cared for at the same time.

The next overarching theme in the 12 Steps is making **reparations**. It is not enough to be aware of your shortcomings or even aware of God's great love — you have to do something about it. AA encourages its members to make amends as far as it is possible and so long as it doesn't cause further injury to yourself or the person you have hurt. This has long been a theme of Christianity. This is the forgiveness piece: receiving forgiveness from God but also forgiving others; seeking their forgiveness and, perhaps the hardest one, forgiving yourself. Making reparations is not a 'once and done' thing — it is a lifestyle. A lifestyle where you take responsibility for your actions, and make a commitment to growing and becoming better. Even if it is two steps forward and one-and-a-half steps back!

This has led our church to doing courses like the *Book of Forgiving* along with the *SetFree!* Retreat, and they have made a huge difference to me and to countless others.

All of this leads to living in a new way – to **Renewal**. It is never perfection in this life, but renewal is about making a habit of being aware of God's love and having a conscious contact with God. Renewal is making a habit of seeing our own failings and making reparations. Renewal is also about moving beyond yourself to caring about others and helping them on their journey, and therefore truly making the world a better place. It's not overnight occurrence, but once you begin to really live Aware and Repair, you will one day realize you're different, you're healthier, you now have more life and more joy.

The 12 Steps focus on the personal level, but the Aware and Repair steps are also important for institutions, communities and countries. This was the purpose of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in our country — to intentionally bring to light past wrongs, and to make amends and reparations with the Indigenous peoples.

I am grateful for Pastor Doug and others in the past who helped to bring this church into a relationship with the Recovery community. I hope this church has been a gift to some who are on that road. I pray that we can

be more and more a place that fosters radical acceptance and authentic relationship — a place that is safe and loving enough to bear the truth that brings healing to brokenness. But even more, I am grateful for the gifts of awareness, reparation and renewal and the new life that the Recovery community has brought to this church. You helped us to remember who our true selves – who *we* are called to be.

Jesus said “*I am the way, the truth and the life*”. You don’t have to have the answers or even the road map, you only need to show up and tune in to Jesus who is *the way*. This is true for us as individuals and for us as a church. It was showing up to Jesus that allowed this church in the early 2000’s to form a relationship that transformed us. We don’t have to figure out 2021 ... we just need to follow the One who is already ahead of us and trust that He will lead us towards new life.

As you show up and become more aware of God’s great love, you will be shown the truth about what needs healing and mending in you and in this world. The good news is that his truth comes wrapped in love and in grace – an amazing grace – that makes you want to do whatever it takes to become more and more the person God created you to be. If you want more life ... not more days in your life, but more life in your days ... come closer to Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.