

Writing the Next Chapter in Cove Church History

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According to the grace of God which has been given to me, as a wise architect I have laid the foundation, and another builds. But let each one who builds take care. For no other foundation can be laid than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, straw, the work of each will become manifest; for the Day will show it, because it will be revealed with fire; and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which anyone has built on the foundation survives, that person will be rewarded. If anyone's work is burned up, that person will suffer loss, though personally saved, but only as through fire.

—The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 3:10-15)

It is somewhat presumptuous to study the history of the church, since the conclusions inherent in such a study are properly left to Christ at the judgment. The story of the church is not yet complete, and each new chapter sheds a different light on that which has gone before.

As the first woman pastor of Cove, I was reluctant to encounter my predecessors, even through the yellowed pages of history. They laid the foundation on which it is my turn to build, and their work has stood the test of time. Mine has yet to be proven. I was afraid I would encounter their disapproval; worse, I was afraid that I would disapprove of them.

What I have found instead has delighted and encouraged me. I have found friends among my predecessors; men who shared my vision for Cove as a place where people come together to show their love for God and for one another, men who also emphasized the importance of education and helping those who were oppressed by poverty and ignorance. I have found human beings who struggled with the limitations of their resources and the absolute demands of the gospel. I have met people of unwavering faith and strong principle, and I have been surprised at how often I have agreed with them.

In the 1740s the Presbyterians gathering for worship in this cove in the Blue Ridge Mountains considered themselves too few in number and too isolated in geography to support a minister. When Hanover Presbytery was formed, they asked only for an occasional supply preacher. A generation later, however, in 1769, their faith and perseverance were rewarded and a pastor came, Rev. Samuel Leake. A meeting house was built, and Cove Church was founded.

It was not an easy time. Lives were brief and difficult; survival was a daily struggle. The life of the church was also a struggle for survival, and yet Cove has always endured despite its many hardships. Perhaps because this has always been a small congregation it has been forced to rely on God's providence instead of human strength. For whatever reason, the dedication and commitment of the members of Cove Church has always been remarkable.

Also remarkable has been the support this church has always received from its friends. According to an article written by Rev. B. M. Wailes in the Chronicle in 1880, the congregation had just finished a major refurbishing of the sanctuary at considerable expense when the storm hit and made it unusable. The church did not have the funds to rebuild, but as soon as word got out of the damage to the "old church," the friends of the church all over the area began to send contributions to help with repairs. This church continues to enjoy generous support from its many friends, whose prayers and gifts make its mission possible.

We cannot measure the effectiveness of a church by numbers or anniversaries. The church is a people, and its life is the lives of its people. The image of the pebble cast into a pond may be trite, but it does illustrate how the complex network of relationships we call the church operates. As Presbyterians, we affirm that we are not isolated individuals or an independent congregation. We are a connectional church, and our connections shape us as we shape others.

In these essays we see that the history of the whole church has affected our history, but it is sometimes hard to imagine that we have affected the history of the church at all. The Christians of Cove have largely labored in anonymity and obscurity. And yet as I flipped through Ernest Trice Thompson's monumental work, Presbyterians in the South I came across something which assured me that Cove had left its mark. On the acknowledgment page of Volume I, Thompson thanks "Miss Mary Virginia Robinson of John Knox Press, who has edited the manuscript and proof with her accustomed skill and attention to detail."

Mary Virginia Robinson grew up in Covesville, on Route 633. She attended Cove Church and made her first profession of faith in this sanctuary. She is still a treasured friend of this congregation. In her work at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond and her development of Sunday School curriculum as well as her efforts at John Knox Press, she has touched thousands of lives and brought them the good news of Christ, which she herself first heard within these walls. She is just one example, albeit a fine one, of Cove's contribution to the whole church.

It is the hope of those who have prepared this history project that knowing more of Cove's history will help to make you a more enthusiastic participant in Cove's future. May our work here today stand up as well under the judgment of time as has the work of our ancestors in faith.