

" Tomorrow Is Only A Vision "

Mayor John H. Logie

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Fountain Street Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: We believe in the freedom of religious expression.

CONGREGATION: All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own theology.

MINISTER: We believe in the toleration of religious ideas.

CONGREGATION: All religions possess not only an intrinsic merit, but also a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.

MINISTER: We believe in the never-ending search for Truth.

CONGREGATION: If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous.

MINISTER: We believe in the unity of experience.

CONGREGATION: There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge.

MINISTER: We believe in the necessity of the democratic process.

CONGREGATION: Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism – so that people might govern themselves.

Adapted from the words of Dr. David O. Rankin, Senior Minister
1982-1998

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SERMON

It is truly an honor to have given Duncan's greeting and to speak from this pulpit. And if the way the organ played the national hymn didn't get your blood flowing, I am sorry you weren't up here with me to hear an impromptu descant from the ladies of the visiting women's' chorus. Thank you for your participation today. It was wonderful.

There are people saying today that this church is in crisis; that it has lost its way; that it is leaderless. That people are leaving to go elsewhere. So I thought it might be helpful to review a little of our history this morning as a way of measuring where we are right now and perhaps where we are going.

The first church building that was completed on this site opened in 1877. Forty years later, May 22, 1917, was a Tuesday. In the early hours of that day before anyone

was present in the building, the Fountain Street Baptist Church caught fire. Not until an explosion was heard in the neighborhood was the fire discovered and by then it was too late to prevent a spectacular and total loss. World War I was on, and no one felt inspired immediately to begin to do anything to rebuild. The congregation went for services to the Powers Theatre, which I suspect some critics of this institution then and now would say is where we belonged in the first place.

Finally, when the war was over, the effort began to be put forward to build a new church. One group of parishioners liked the northeast corner of Fulton and Lafayette, diagonally across the street from today's Women's City Club. We almost became Fulton Street Church.

The new church building was dedicated in 1924, on the same site as the old. Think of that! Seven years without a home for this church. They had only planned to spend \$600,000, but there was a 33% cost overrun, for which they did not have the money, up to \$800,000. Of course, to put that into perspective, it took the equivalent of one year's operating budgeting today, to build this gorgeous building and sanctuary. The minister throughout this trying time was Dr. Alfred Wesley Wishart, a correctly sized gentleman about 5 feet, six inches tall. It was Dr. Wishart who dramatically moved forward the ideas of a liberal religious community from a history that had been building as early as the 1890's. In one of his sermons, he asked, "Why then should people demand a changeless religion and a static church?" His answer was, "It cannot be. The stars in their courses fight against finality in religion, and a church hardened against change." It was also Dr. Wishart who, in 1928, engaged in a marvelous debate right here in our church with the famous criminal defense lawyer Clarence Darrow whose own religion was somewhere between agnosticism and atheism. The debate topic was headlined, "Belief in a General Purpose in the Universe Is Rational and Justified by the Facts." Wishart took the affirmative, Darrow the negative. The entire text of their debate is captured in the Michigan Room of the Grand Rapids Public Library.

In 1941, the senior minister was Milton M. McGorrill, who had presided over a membership that was steadily dwindling, Sunday attendance was significantly down, and the city-wide influence of a once-powerful church was diminishing. He was secretly asked to resign. He refused. The following letter was then sent to Mr. McGorrill from the board:

We cannot believe that you are blind to the lack of progress, the waning enthusiasm, the stunted growth of this institution. Maybe it is our fault, {but} we have to face realities. This board was here long before you came and it will have to continue long after you are gone. If our combined efforts have been insufficient to breathe into this church the spark of life it needs then we must part company. No matter whose fault it is, we are the constant factor and you are the variable.

Still, it was two years later that McGorrill finally offered his resignation in 1943, and even then the vote to accept it was 8 to 6. Well, that is truly Fountain Street Church isn't it? The search for his replacement began inauspiciously. The entire first pulpit committee resigned after only two weeks when a dispute erupted over the fact that the

Board of Trustees and not the members had improperly appointed the committee. A second pulpit committee was elected directly by the church members in June, 1943. It included in its members Thomas Kindel, John Blodgett and Dorothy Leonard Judd.

They discovered Duncan Littlefair preaching in an upper-class suburban church in Kenilworth, Illinois, and quickly extended an invitation for him to visit Grand Rapids. Duncan declined. He had only been there a couple of years. Lee Wilson Hutchins was the chairman of the Board of Trustees, and wrote Duncan a polite letter, inviting him to reconsider, and asking if he might visit Fountain Street for just one day. Mr. Hutchins, who was the founder of the Grand Rapids Foundation, tempted Dr. Littlefair by telling him that, if after such a visit, he still believed that Kenilworth needed him more than Grand Rapids, then our pulpit committee would "naturally abide graciously by that decision."

Meanwhile, correctly anticipating Littlefair's negative response, Dorothy Judd had written him a most amazing letter. Let me share part of it with you:

You can't develop Christian thinking from the ivory tower of a little stone church in the wealthy suburban community. You can only develop it where it can be tested during the process of its growth in the crucible of daily life in a community presenting many facets of human living.

She concluded her letter by writing:

But of one thing I am sure: it is now—not tomorrow—that the world needs men like you. Whether you realize it or not, you have something that men hunger for—a depth and sincerity of conviction that prods men to aspire to the impossible. This is a quality that God has given to few men. Surely God has laid on those men the burden of giving themselves without fear or stint to mankind. So come out of your ivory tower, young man. Go where you will, but administer through as wide a group as you can reach to the yearnings of men for a faith that will enable them to build a new world."

This lady, the wife of the founder of my law firm, was also responsible, along with Duncan and others, for getting George Welsh to resign as the mayor. It is no wonder that she is in the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame. But I suggest to you that there are women and, yes, perhaps a few men, in this congregation today who can, and perhaps will, write such a letter in the not far distant future.

Duncan was in the pulpit when Susie and I came back to my hometown in 1968 and we started visiting churches all over Grand Rapids. Neither of us had ever been here for a service so when we got here, of course, Duncan was standing where I am now. The lights were going up and the lights were coming down and he was fulminating against various injustices. If you did not think it was the best show in town, you were missing

something. He had a great power to get me all stirred up about his topic. I remember one morning walking back up Fountain Street to the parking lot on the other side of the old library arguing with Duncan out loud to Susie. And then suddenly stopping and realizing wasn't this marvelous just how much he had gotten my brain engaged in his topic.

When we needed a letter to adopt our daughter, Susannah, we were with a very strongly religious organization called the Holt Adoption Program. I asked Duncan to write a letter and then I started wondering what Holt might think about Fountain Street Church. But it was a marvelous letter and it helped our daughter come and join our family.

After Duncan's retirement announcement, we had to create a pulpit committee for the first time in almost forty years. That first committee elected by the congregation was chaired by now-retired Grand Valley University president, Don Lubbers. I think you all know the story that happened then when a member of the pulpit committee ran off with the almost new minister. Some critics said the end of Fountain Street was at hand. So, there was a second pulpit committee which I had the privilege of chairing. One of the first things I did was go and see Mary Kindel, Tom Kindel's widow, and Dorothy Judd who was still very much alive and very much a member of this church. They had wonderful insights of the work of that first committee in 1943 to bring Duncan Littlefair to this church. It was not easy, but they kept at it and they succeeded.

When we discovered David Rankin, he was preaching in the second largest UUA church in the country in Atlanta and, like Duncan, he had only been there a couple of years. It took a couple of missions down to Atlanta, but the one that I remember best, involved one of our pulpit committee members and a lawyer friend of mine and now deceased, Doug Lewis, who had read just about everything that David had ever written. He came across a wonderful quote at the end of one of David's sermons, which I cannot recall precisely, but we had it calligraphed on parchment and then framed. The dynamic was, that after we were done talking for an afternoon, we were advised by David and Ginger that they, of course, were not going to make any decision about the offer from Fountain Street Church that day. They did not want us to be disappointed. I had Doug go out and get this framed document and we just walked in and presented it to them and said, "Whatever you do, we thought you should have these words." And the essence of it was that "If you are not willing to try something new, you are morally dead."

Our plan was to have the Rankins join us for an early dinner that night before we got on a plane to come back to Grand Rapids. They brought with them their son, Oran, a teenager at that time, who is still a member of this church. It was very tense around that table until David finally sat back and said, "You know we have talked it over and we think we would like to come to Fountain Street Church."

Somewhere along my own odyssey I found out a connection to this church I did not even know about. My mother's name was Mary Elizabeth Hoult Logie. She died unfortunately at the age of 38 in 1953 and her parents had preceded her and that side of my family sort of went dark. But she gave me my great grandfather's name. The "H"

in between John and Logie is Hault, so I was named for him. In 1977, Dorothy Judd and others published our book about the windows here in this marvelous sanctuary. The "Wisdom Window" with all of the secular people that are up there has inscribed under it, "In Memory of John Hault, gift of Mrs. Florence Hault and her children, November 11, 1928." Sometimes you are or get connected to things that you don't even know about, right here at Fountain Street Church.

David retired. Another pulpit committee got elected and found and brought to this church Brent Smith. It turned out not to be a good fit, so here we are today having to once again go back into the marketplace to find a new minister for this pulpit and for an independent, non-denominational church that is always going to be a challenge. But compare that to the challenges that have faced us in the past. I think we Grand Rapidsians often underestimate ourselves. Let me give you three quick examples.

In 1945, we were the first city in the world to put fluoride into our drinking water. And about 7 years ago now, we had a 50th anniversary celebration of that event. People came from all over the world. They came from all six continents to be part of that celebration. It was a huge deal to them: The leadership that this community had shown in doing that.

I think of the Calder stabile, down on what is correctly named Vandenberg Plaza, but increasingly is referred to as Calder Plaza. This big orange sculpture in front of City Hall turns out is the largest and, most sculpture critics would say, most critically acclaimed, outdoor sculpture that Alexander Calder ever did at 42 tons, 84,000 pounds. And as we did with the fluoride, we sort of take it for granted.

And I think of where we live, and have lived now for 34 years, up in Heritage Hill. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. It is one of the largest architecturally significant residential historic districts anywhere in the United States with over sixty distinct architectural styles. The preservation of those buildings is written about regularly. But again, because it is part of the fabric of our community, we tend to take it for granted.

Fountain Street Church's reputation as the beacon light of liberal religious thought is known around this country. It, too, has a national reputation; one that we should and can hold up to those who would call this time a crisis. Duncan himself said more than fifty years ago, "I would not want to be the minister of a church in which there were no problems and no difference." The challenge is part of the journey. Even Jeremiah, no particular great optimist he, wrote, 'There is hope for your future, says the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.'"

Tomorrow, our future, may be only a vision, but what a vision it is. Built on a rock-solid foundation of the common belief we spoke aloud today in the responsive reading, carried forward by our one hundred plus years' liberal tradition and nurtured by those ties of love which DO bind us together, We Shall Not Fail.