Thomas Cogdell with Amy Cogdell

UNITY THROUGH Repentance

The Journey to Wittenberg 2017

"An inspiring story of reconciliation in a wounded world."
–John Dawson

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Unity through Repentance: The Journey to Wittenberg 2017

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Chapter 1

Hope Chapel

This was surely one of the most memorable conferences we have ever attended, and we've been to many over the years. What we experienced was ecumenism in the deepest, truest sense of the word. There was heartfelt singing; moving mutual apologies made by Catholics and Lutherans to Anabaptists, and vice versa! There were hefty seminars on historical and theological topics that made us think, and opened our eyes; but also deeply stirring moments when people bared their souls. In between the larger gatherings, there were continual stimulating encounters with other seekers who were burning with the question of what it means to follow Christ. No one there was pushing an agenda, or "blowing their own horn," or engaging in identity politics. Instead, the conference was animated by a spirit of true togetherness, expectancy, and JOY.

Chris and Bea Zimmerman
Bruderhof (Anabaptist), England

The Lord brought Thomas and Amy into my life when they were in the high school youth group at Hope Chapel. They were part of the most extraordinary group of young people I have ever met. As they were married and through the years that followed, it was obvious to me that the Lord's hand of favor was upon them. When Thomas brought their vision for the Wittenberg meeting to me, it was totally consistent with the trajectory of how God had been leading them. But it was a big dream. Far bigger than anything that they could ever do without the Holy Spirit's prevenient grace at work in the hearts of the major church leaders in the many streams that make up his church.

Dan Davis, founding pastor of Hope Chapel
(Protestant / nondenominational), Austin, Texas USA

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"This story needs to be written for the annals of reconciliation." These words surprised me with joy and wonder for they came from John Dawson, the leader of Youth With a Mission (YWAM) and one of my heroes in the faith. I never expected to have even a single conversation with this man. But in 2015 the Lord arranged our meeting on a prayer journey to Prague. During that trip I shared with him the vision of the Wittenberg 2017 initiative, which he ended up attending as one of the speakers. Some months after the event, he called and urged me to write this book.

As encouraging as John's words were, the astounding, humbling truth is that the Lord has already written this story—and all our stories—for his own remembrance. This is what the prophet Malachi says:

> Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored His name. (Mal 3:16)

The implications are that God remembers …

> Every conversation that brings him glory.
> Every recounting of his goodness.
> Every discussion of his mercy.
> Every fearful phone call to an offended friend.
> All humble words of repentance, and each reply of forgiveness.

These are all recorded for eternity.

Certainly heaven was listening in the fall of 2017 when a remarkable group of people gathered in the medieval town of Wittenberg, Germany. They came in groups of twos, threes, and fours filing into the former seminary where Martin Luther taught in 1517, the year he formulated his Ninety-Five Theses. They traveled from many nations to observe the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Nobody's attitude was triumphant celebration—not even the Lutherans. Instead, they gathered in grief over the hostile divisions in the body of Christ, desiring to pray John 17 with Jesus—"that they all will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." They came to sing, to teach, to reflect, to discuss, and to listen.

Who were these people filing through the doors?

They were Germans, Austrians, Swiss, Poles, Dutch, Britons, Norwegians, Hungarians, Slovaks, Serbs, Aussies, Kiwis, Israelis, Mexicans, Canadians, and Americans.

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They were Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, nondenominational Evangelicals, Mennonites, Bruderhof, Amish, Eastern Orthodox, and Messianic Jews.

They were clergy and laity, missionaries and nuns.

They were nobility and plain folk, scholars and students.

They were young and old, babies to octogenarians, men and women, boys and girls.

It was truly an amazing assembly—diverse, lively, august, wise.



The commissioning service at the very end of the 2017 gathering was led by seven clergy and leaders from (left to right) the Pentecostal, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Anabaptist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Messianic Jewish traditions. Photo by Ryan and Noleen Thurman. Used with permission.

And the people standing at the microphone to speak the words of welcome were … my wife, Amy, and me.

How did we receive this honor?

How did a lay couple from Texas find themselves welcoming priests and pastors to a quintessentially German event?

That is one of the many "surprises of the Holy Spirit" in this story—the story of Wittenberg 2017.[1]

Telling the story requires going back in time. Back to the year 1980. Back to a sequence of events that while perhaps quiet and seemingly commonplace were nonetheless significant. When Amy, my future wife, was in middle

1 My original title for the book was "Surprises of the Spirit," which was a frequent saying of Father Peter Hocken's—and how he characterized the Wittenberg 2017 initiative.

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school, her family faced a decision. They were planning to move from their home in New Mexico either to Colorado Springs or back to their native state of Texas. Colorado Springs was an attractive choice considering the fact that they were living at the time in a ski village with breathtaking views. It is hard to leave the beauty of the mountains.

Her family took an exploratory trip to Colorado, looking for homes and job opportunities. Just as they arrived, an out-of-season snowstorm struck. Would I have met Amy otherwise? Only God knows, of course, but I like to think that he sent that freak snowstorm in 1980. As her whole family sat shivering in Colorado Springs, the heat of central Texas began to sound pretty good!

The Craver family moved to Austin, the city where I was born and raised. In the mid-1970s, my parents were moving on from a Jesus People church called The Well. It had been a wonderful environment for a young child. I had surrendered my life to Jesus and was baptized there at the age of seven. However, The Well dissolved as the leadership team fell apart. My family joined a group that decided to attend St. David's Episcopal, a historic downtown church.

Soon I was in junior high, with all that that implies. Puberty, hormones, temptations, and peer pressure were in full swing. During services at St. David's, I sat bored in the pews until I could manufacture an acceptable reason to leave the service, wander through the building or surrounding streets, and uncover any mischief I could find.

My parents, somewhat in desperation, lured me to a Christian summer camp by telling me it was a sports camp. Indeed, we did play basketball and tennis during the day, but at night we sang songs, prayed, and listened to evangelistic messages from the camp counselors. I remember one night vividly. I wandered out to the soccer goal, looked up at the stars, and told Jesus that I wanted to live only for him. So at age seven I had been saved by Jesus; but at age fourteen I became a disciple of Jesus.

Shortly after I got back to Austin, my best friend called. "Thomas, I found an awesome youth group—do you want to come next week?" Of course I did! And I loved it. After that first Wednesday night youth meeting, I told my parents, "You can stay at St. David's, but I am going to Hope Chapel!"[2]

2 My parents graciously followed me and became integrated into the local church life of Hope Chapel.

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Hope Chapel is where I met Amy. It is also where I formed other lifelong friendships that would play a role in the Wittenberg 2017 story. When I look back at that decision, and all that has come from it, I am in awe—and a little frightened. God entrusted an immature young teenager with a life-altering decision. I don't know that I would have done that. God's tolerance for risk seems to me much higher than ours.

This aspect of God's character—tolerance for risk—was well represented at Hope Chapel, a small independent, nondenominational church. It was founded in 1977 by Dan Davis.



Dan Davis with his wife, Joann, in the early days of Hope Chapel. Photo courtesy of Dan and Joann Davis. Used with permission.

Dan had left his position as a marketing executive at Intel to start the church. Being trained in business rather than at seminary, Dan held some leadership values uncharacteristic of typical church administration. One of those values was the celebration of failure. If someone in the church tried something new, and failed, he would throw a party to celebrate! This encouraged everyone in the pews to take risks. As a result, Hope Chapel became a church where new initiatives were continually started, with the full support of church leadership.

Another of Dan's gifts was his vision for church unity. Dan saw that many senior pastors suffered from loneliness as a result of competitiveness. He also saw the damage this competition did to the kingdom of God in a city. Dan countered this division by continually teaching his flock, "There is only one church in the city! It meets in many places, but it is only one church." As his influence grew among other pastors in Austin, this idea began to take hold. Today Austin is blessed with remarkable unity among the Protestant pastors, and Dan is largely credited with leading the way in forming relationships, fostering cooperation, and encouraging honor among the city's pastors.

I grew up sitting under Dan's preaching, and these twin ideas of risk and unity became part of my normal Christian life. The Hope Chapel youth

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