

SE042708

AC3 in the SOUP

2. AC3 Past, Present, Future.

When you were born, you became part of the story of your family tree. You got connected after many generations had come and gone, but now their history is your history. It belongs to you and you belong to it. So you must know this history to know where you fit, to know this name that you now must carry into the next chapter.

Well every person who enters AC3 should feel this same way. Some of you have been here for a while, some of you, just stepped into the story. But each of us should know OUR story, which is now YOUR story. The truth is, when a person becomes a Christian and gets baptized, you don't just enter into a relationship with God that begins in a vacuum. You enter into a rich history that started a long time ago.

So I'm going to tell you our story... but there's a prologue before chapter one of AC3 begins:

PROLOGUE: BEGINNINGS

Jerusalem 37 A.D. A band of Jews are teaching about Messiah, which the Jews had done for ages. But this band identifies Messiah with a young man who had only recently been executed by Roman Authorities a few years back. They call themselves followers of "the Way" and they love each other with a radical love and they preach a simple message: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again!

Against this group are Jewish authorities who call on a young zealot, Saul of Tarsus, to reign in the upstart Christians. He has many harassed and killed. But on a trip to Damascus, a blinding light stopped Saul cold. He fell to the ground and Saul clearly heard a voice say:

Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?

Who are you Lord?, Saul asked.

I am Jesus the one you are persecuting. Now stand up! For ...I am going to send you to the Gentiles, to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light. They will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people.

So Saul – or Paul as he was called after this experience – turned from Christ hater to Christ lover. And he was faithful to this vision from the Risen Jesus. He worked tirelessly to form little bands of Christ followers all over the Mediterranean.

From there, the movement spread, taking over the Roman empire in 300 years and transforming its brutality with a new way of love. On the centuries rolled, but the church became a victim of its own success, growing fat and corrupt with power. But during one of the lowest moments, when the Way of freedom and grace seemed to be inescapably under the grip of man-made traditions, a Breath of freedom swept across Europe. A

reformation began – a rediscovery of Paul’s gospel and God’s power to change lives through Jesus Christ.

A Roman Catholic monk from the Netherlands named Menno Simmons who had been a priest for 12 years but had never read the Bible once, one day rediscovered words of Paul that were 1500 years old:

“by grace you have been saved, through faith.”

A movement of Simons’ followers called Mennonites sprung up, who rejected worldly ways and clung to the Bible, and to radical acts of kindness, and non-violence in keeping with the ways of their Master. Over centuries these Mennonite Christians migrated and spread from the Netherlands to Russia, Pennsylvania, Bolivia and Canada.

In 1864 a wave of Mennonites landed on the Canadian Prairies. One family was lead by Henry Thiessen, who spent his first freezing prairie winter in a mud hole dug into the Red River bank with only a goat to keep them warm. His grandson was Jacob Thiessen, born in Manitoba in 1912, who started his adult life as a drinker and partier. He fell in love and got his girlfriend Justina pregnant and they fell into great shame in their puritan Mennonite community.

But there in the middle of his sin, Jacob discovered the amazing grace of God to heal his soul. He embraced the faith of his fathers, the faith of Menno Simmons, and the faith of Paul and he became a new man.

Jacob’s grandson Richard, was born in 1967. By the time he was in late Junior High School, Richard was mostly cold toward the faith handed down to him. But his grandfather’s life kept him saying to himself,

if I became a Christian, I would want to be one like him. I don’t know what he has, but I want it.

In 1981, Richard, whom everyone called Ricky, went to a Christian camp. He was 15 years old. A man named TV Thomas, born in Malacca, Malaysia, was speaking. His heavily accented words cut that young man to the core of his apathetic heart... and he realized he stood justly condemned before a good God. But this same God was opening the eyes of this young *Gentile and calling him out of darkness and into his wonderful light for forgiveness of sins and to be given a place among God’s people.*

The Apostle Paul would be happy.

Richard took his place in history – in HIS STORY – on that day. What came then was the challenges of following Jesus in high school, but also an inexplicable, persistent sense of peace... a restless heart found it’s resting place. He was baptized that next spring, to seal the faith and salvation that had been freely poured out on him.

It was so life changing, so real, he wanted to share it – he felt inspired by a calling. No one needed to accept the Answer Richard felt compelled to share, the Answer that met him so beautifully there at Pelican Lake in 1981.

But it felt WRONG for him to not spend his life offering it.

So he went to Bible College, met his future wife, an American, and started working as a youth pastor in the church she grew up in, in Arlington WA. This church, was passionate about unchurched people, and ministry there was led by an entrepreneurial leader and a close friend.

In 1993, at the very moment Richard returned with 15 students from a Mexico mission trip, he and his wife and youth group were ushered into the youth chapel for what they thought was a surprise homecoming party. The greeting was very reserved. “They’re doing a good job of playing up the surprise,” they thought. Expecting balloons and music when they walked in the door, the group was greeted instead by adults with stone faces and some in tears.

The head elder sat everyone down and began his speech:

We’ve gathered you together to share heart breaking news. This summer it has come to light that our senior pastor has been involved in moral failure and he has resigned.

CHAPTER ONE: “CONCEIVED IN GRIEF, BORN FOR MISSION.”

My life was instantly altered. I was thrust into preaching every week and into the thick of turmoil as our leadership team of staff and elders experienced massive transitional pains. It was a dark time in my life. Relationships were strained, conversations were heated, conflict was routine.

The wheels wobbled on that church, but thanks to God, never came off. The dust settled and a new pastor, John Stumbo, came and gave the church much needed stability.

However, my calling to be a part of a church that was aggressively sharing the life transforming message of Christ with the unchurched was only building. And this passion for the outsiders was growing just as the church was understandably licking it’s wounds and drawing back from aggressively inviting unchurched people in.

During this transition time, some good friends who had been trained at that church to stretch and ache and sacrifice to build a church that reaches seekers were already forming plans to launch an aggressive mission in the Marysville area. That was 1994 and they called it Allen Creek Community Church. That was too long to say so one of the founders, Tim Getty, took to calling it AC3. The nick name stuck.

But I felt no release to join such a work – until John set SPCC on a steady course. Finally, in 1995 my wife and I took a long walk on Cannon Beach during a pastor’s retreat. We weighed our options. We wanted to plant AC3. But would it fail? We

considered the sacrifices. Denominational ties would be cut. No money, no building, no people. Just a bible and a dream to build a biblically functioning community, to carry on Paul's mandate with the independent unchurched folks of Snohomish county.

Though it could all blow up... there was one thing I rested in: it wasn't about success, it was about obedience. God wasn't asking for us to make it happen, he was asking us to obey.

- If He loved us, it didn't matter so much what happened.

So with that in my mind, I told John of my desire to plant a church. He graciously offered to make AC3 a daughter church which I declined in order to be free of denominational encumbrances and names. Still he and the church blessed us with a going away banquet in as we left that summer to follow God's calling.

CHAPTER TWO: "WE DON'T EXIST JUST TO SURVIVE"

In 1995, on September 3, Mark and Debbie Holland, Tim and Judi Getty my wife and I and about a dozen other adults gathered at Lake Goodwin to launch the core building phase of AC3. The core building phase would be a season to gather like-minded Christians who felt called to be a part of a vision of a church for the unchurched. To reach them and then build up believers to be fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

We would meet for a year before we did any outreach... to build infrastructure, a small group network, a worship service, a children's ministry and creative teams. We were preparing for a public phase, when we would invite the community and every seeking person we knew, to a service designed just for them.

That fall, a living room at the Holland house soon filled to capacity. We weren't sure we could afford it, but we needed space so we moved to a Henry's Lady banquet room... quickly expanding by Christmas to fill two banquet rooms. By February of 1996 we again needed space and the auditorium of Cedar Crest Middle School was available, but for \$1200 a month, three times what we paid for the banquet rooms.

Church in a school required sacrifice of time, and effort and money. A lighting system was purchased, 4:30 AM Sunday mornings a set up crew arrived, a team brought them breakfast, children's workers took over classrooms, as run-throughs happened on stage. That Easter we decided to do a live, outdoor drama in Jennings Park. We had our first baptism that spring – 15 people!

By September of 1996, we had a core of 50 to 60 adults and we were ready to launch. September 29th our first public service we invited all our seeking friends to was entitled: ***Dear God, Save me From Your Followers.*** 75 people were there and we thought that the floodgates had opened up! The next day I wrote in my prayer journal:

It was all so REAL! You did it God! We built it and they came! Real souls, real seekers, real skeptics. We're on the front line. ...There is so much at stake here. This is risky business we've signed on for. ..We've been literally inundated

with attacks from the enemy as we've entered his territory. But the battle belongs to you and so I'll trust you. You didn't bring us this far to leave us.

Having risked everything to start the church, in 1996 to 1998, we now we had a church of about a 100 people and that was bigger than 75% of all churches in the US and since more than 2/3 of all church plants fail, we were feeling good about just surviving.

Too good. We started to feel a sense that we needed to stay alive at all costs. We had risked to get it going, now it was going, and the urge to scale back and protect our gains was enormous. We fell into survival mode. Play it safe. Finally, we realized that at 4 years old, we were getting crusty.

And on our knees I remember the elders saying (and it wouldn't be the last time) "we didn't start AC3 to survive... we risked everything to BE a fully functioning church. Reaching seekers, building believers. It's up to God if we survive or not, our job is to fulfill our mandate."

That wasn't easy to say, or to live out and it was even harder for some people to hear. But when we realized we weren't in this to survive, we were ready for our next phase.

CHAPTER 3: THE AWKWARD TEENAGE YEARS

So in 1999, we decided to risk everything. So to be more effective in our mission we signed a 5 year lease on this building and hired another full time staff person, Dan Hazen to run and develop small groups for community and learning. If that weren't enough risk, we added more by a clerical error of \$10,000 the same year we tripled our building expenses and almost doubled our budget.

Jesus said one time, "he who is faithful with little will be entrusted with much." And we felt God smiling on us as we launched into this new season. Within a year, we had made up for the error, and almost doubled our attendance to 250, we added another Saturday seeker service and ended the year with \$30,000 in the bank. We were growing and God was bringing more and more people to us, hungry to explore Christianity and needing a safe place to do it.

We were like a teenager, growing like a weed, but needing maturity and strength to support our growing frame, needing more depth, needing to survive the raging emotions of adolescence. The leadership team did survive a major conflict. A lot of people were hurt by mistakes I made. But we learned something about biblical peace making that's defined us ever since. Like a lot of teenagers, adolescence is a time when your life could blow up in your face. But God held AC3 together.

And like a football team drafting unknown players, we were drawing seekers and believers to AC3 that we didn't know at the time, but would some day become staff members, small group leaders, board members of the future.

CHAPTER 4: "IN FLIGHT REFUELING"

My Alaskan Malamute, Toby was as tall as he is today when he was 7 months old. But he looked like a unfed, shaggy grey hound at 95 lbs. Today he's 130 lbs – not fat. Now he has the look of a wolf and the body of a bull mastiff. He filled out, lets say.

I mention this because between 2002 and 2005, AC3 was filling out. It wasn't much taller from a sheer numerical standpoint. We hit a bunch of growth inhibitors in this building early on, such as our pinched lobby, and tiny parking lot. But in a way, this served us because our organization needed to grow deeper before it got wider.

It was during this time of plateau that we consolidated, aligned our ministries and better filled out our ministry portfolio. We added

- Quest with our elective path for spiritual seeker to fully devoted follower of Christ.
- The Thing, a young adult ministry
- Seeds of Grace, from freed bread to a distribution center
- Outer court
- Visioncast
- Living Waters to Brazil
- Leadership Quest.

Some things just became part of our unique AC3 vocabulary. How many remember, "one hand up, one hand down"? Howa bout LION, OTTER, BEAVER, RETRIEVER? Love Languages, Gift mix, Mind the Gap, The Losers bench, were people sat when a friend they invited to church didn't join them.

We had some high profile defections as some wounded Christians enjoyed the safety of AC3 to heal and then parted when they realized that our mission required them to become self feeders and take the initiative to get involved and take someone else along.

This chapter in our history was about growing deeper, not wider and we did. But like a chick, incubating in a shell, AC3 was getting ready to bust out into something new.

CHAPTER 5: "NEW LANDS"

In 2005, the pinch of our facilities on our ministries had become unbearable. So from a position of remarkable unity in the leadership teams, we launched the ALL IN campaign in February of 2006. ALL IN was more than a big fundraiser. It was truly a call to everyone who called AC3 their church home to ask if they were ALL IN with God. Were they holding back? Hedging their bets? Were they flirting with full devotion or really pursuing it?

Were they ALL IN with investing and risking their time/talent/treasure for that same life changing word that changed a Christ hater in the 1st century into the Apostle of love? Were they ALL IN to creating a safe place in Marysville were God's grace could be understood, experienced and responded to?

With amazing miracles and surprises, as you heard in our ALL IN updates, we now stand ready to risk all over again and move into new territory, with new tools, to see more fruit.

CONCLUSION:

And I want to say this to anyone who wasn't there in chapter 1 or 2:

- You're part of the story now!

- And you come in at a critical moment in the story. We stand on the edge of amazing transformation. In some ways, we're re-launching. You weren't here for the first launch and all those miracles, but you've shown up just in time for a new thing God is doing right here at this church.

- What will AC3 be in a few years? We don't know. But from our past, we know some things: we're going to be a safe place to hear a dangerous message. The safety is our creativity, our authenticity, our relevance. The danger is the cost of following the One who said, "unless you give up all you have for my sake, you cannot be my disciple"

- Friend, you're here now, today for a reason! Maybe it's so that you can help build this little community into it's next chapter. Maybe your life, your gifts, your story will be enfolded into the greater story of AC3 and the even grander story of Christ's church in history.

- What if you're here in Chapter 5 just so there will be a chapter 6 for someone like you to find a safe place for their weary soul to come find the One who said, "I will give you rest."

So, that's where in the world we've come from, and what in the world we're doing and where we're going. We reaching seekers, building believers. We've seen skeptics convinced, seekers found, we've fed the hungry, baptized 200 people, seen believers matured, and ministers made and sent back out locally and around the world.

It's been an AMAZING STORY! I invite you into the story! Into our history. Which is really HIS STORY.