

West Valley Church
October 20, 2019
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WVC Guyana Dedication Celebration

The first time we set foot in Victoria Village was in August of 2014. The place under where that building is now, was just mud, dirt, and some grass. There were four of us on that first visit – it was “Papa” Jim, “Sister” Eva Lounsbury (our missions president), “Sister” Desiree (who was on the missions council), and me. We stood on that long, narrow, empty lot, looking at the mud and grass, trying to envision what a building would look like on that place, and I can tell you that back then, we could not have envisioned the building that is there now.

But now, by the grace of God, things are different. There is a building there. A house of God.

Just seeing that building is a reminder of the power and love that God can show to his people. As we look into the past, just think of all the things that God did, to make that building possible. Was it a chance encounter between four people from Yakima, Washington, and a visionary pastor in Victoria Village? Or was it the hand of God? Think about it: that God would put it in our hearts to seek out a partnership at the same time and year that the Victoria Church was dreaming of a church and community center to replace its old, torn down church building? Was that luck, or was it the hand of God?

I knew when I arrived here in 2010 that we needed to seek a partnership, and it was in 2012 that we finally first made plans for some kind of a partnership with a church somewhere. In 2011 I spoke to Dr. Daniel Ketchum, the director of Global Missions for the Church of the Nazarene at that time and asked him what it would take for us to develop a partnership somewhere. His answer was, “We don’t really know how to do that.” I said, “Well, we’re going to figure it out.” So we began to set criteria and consider countries, and we were sure that God was leading us to partner with a church in Cuba. I took an exploratory trip to Cuba and toured the country visiting our Nazarene churches there. I was sure *that* was where we were to go. But then, for some strange reason, we felt like God was closing that door. We had an experience similar to what is described in the Book of Acts 16:6-10:

“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

For us at West Valley Church, God was making it clear that the door to Cuba was closed for us. We didn't know why, and we were disappointed and confused, but we trusted God and continued to pray. I called Bob Prescott, who was coordinating Work and Witness projects for the Church of the Nazarene and shared with him my disappointment and confusion. He suggested we consider another area of the Caribbean. He arranged for me to meet with him while we were in Indianapolis for General Assembly in 2013, so that we could discuss it further. He wanted me to meet with him and a District Superintendent from a country I had barely heard of. That DS was Dr. Porter and that country was Guyana. I wasn't sure this was going to work, but after speaking with them, I agreed that we would send a team to Guyana to see things for ourselves.

In August of 2013 the four of us went to Guyana for a very busy and fast week. Dr. Porter graciously spent the week with us, taking us around the district, seeing almost every church on the district and meeting many people. We attended part of the worship service at their district youth camp, we attended Bible studies at different churches, we prayed with people and were prayed over by people. We had prophecy spoken over us. Finally, we spent time in Victoria. I think Dr. Porter saved Victoria for last – probably on purpose, so that Victoria would leave a lasting impression on us! During our visit to Victoria Church, we met many of their folks for the first time. While we were there, Pastor Fitz drove us around in his car. There were the four of us in Pastor's car, and then there were another six guys in the back! We drove around, saw the village, got into a fender-bender in the middle of the very busy market on the seacoast highway because we went on a search for fresh bananas – Sister Eva insisted that we find fresh bananas. One of the young men, Brother Simon, taught us the banana dance... And we had come to love the people of Victoria, who welcomed and loved us. By the time we were finished, it was as if we had a vision of a man – a man from Victoria – just like Paul's vision of a man from Macedonia in Acts 16.

After our first trip, Dr. Porter sent me a copy of Pastor Fitz' vision and mission statement for Victoria, and I was surprised how his vision for the church being a place of service to their community was so similar to West Valley Church.

We are humbled and privileged that they would allow us to share in the fulfillment of the vision God had given them and are so grateful for the honor of being able to work together with them.

Can't you see God's hand in all of this? Do you see the hand of God as we at West Valley Church raised the money, even while we continued to meet our own budgets, including continuing to make payments on our own mortgage? Do you see the hand of God as our people at West Valley not only gave for the construction of the building in Victoria, but also paid our own way to go help build it, time and again? Did you see the hand of God as many of you who could not go yourselves gave money so that others of us could go there in your place? How could it be anything but the hand of God for our church to send a total of nearly \$130,000 US for the project over the five years, and in addition, pay nearly \$2,000 per person to go there, *and* to raise that much for Dr. Porter and Sis Allison, Pastor Fitz, and Brother

Westley and Sister Annie to come visit us in Yakima? *Listen to this:* the total that WVC has *sent* and *spent* over these five years has exceeded \$250,000. How can that NOT be the hand of God's gracious provision through your generosity? We can see the hand of God as brick by brick in backyards and homes and on the church property in Victoria, the people of Victoria Church made bricks, bent and tied rebar, and poured gallon after gallon after gallon of concrete into their new facility. Some of the people in attendance at the dedication service last week did not even attend the Victoria Church until they saw the building being built. How thankful we are for each of them, young and old, who worked together in such miraculous ways. How we thank God for all the members of both churches who donated their time, who donated their effort, who made sacrifice after sacrifice, so that the house of God could stand in Victoria today. Can you see the hand of God working through all of these people?

The people of Victoria Church of the Nazarene were so patient with us when we didn't understand their culture, their way of doing things. They gave us the incredible honor and privilege of ministering to hundreds of children at all those Vacation Bible Schools, and the children were willing to be taught by these strange white people. My wife, Shelly, was working with one young child at VBS who was looking her up and down, apparently having not seen a white person up close before. Finally, the little girl asked my wife, "Is your blood red, too?" I remember when we brought our first big team down, someone from Guyana told me that it was hard to tell our people apart because we all looked alike! And we struggled at first recognizing everyone there, too – until we both looked past our outward appearances and looked into the faces and eyes of one another and loved each other as the Church, the body of Christ.

Now the building stands near completion, and the building belongs to God. It was built and paid for and financed by people, and we are truly thankful for every single person who participated in the construction of that building. But ultimately, all credit belongs to God. And ultimately, that building belongs to God. His name should be on the deed.

It's true that God is not limited to a building – he lives everywhere. But it's also true that wherever the Word of God is preached, God is there. Wherever two or three gather together around the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God is there. Wherever water and the Word come together in baptism, God is there, causing a rebirth and renewal by his Holy Spirit. Wherever bread and cup are shared in the same way Jesus shared with his disciples, the body and blood of Christ "given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins" – God is there, forgiving and strengthening his people.

Through his Word, and through worship of Him and the practice of the sacraments, God dwells there. The church building is where the message of Christ crucified for the sins of the world is proclaimed. It is where people can receive comfort when they sin, and strength when they are weak. It is where God's people seek a deeper work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The church building is where a young couple can stand before God and promise to love each other for the rest of their lives and receive God's blessing upon their marriage. That is where a family can mourn the

loss of a loved one and receive comfort that their loved one is in heaven, and that someday they will see him again at the resurrection, which is exactly what both churches did when we learned of the tragic and sudden death of Brother Simon Paul in the horrible car accident. The church is where you can receive strength from God, that special divine strength you need as you face all the problems of today, and all the unknown challenges of tomorrow. The church building is where God dwells through Word and worship, and speaks to our hearts, and strengthens our souls.

But here's the deal: the construction of the physical building in Victoria – the steel and concrete and the brick and the plumbing and the electrical – that will all be completed at some point. But the construction of the Christian Church – the people who hear the Gospel and offer their praise to God – that's *not* done. God isn't finished building his church, his people, either in Victoria or here. There are people in Victoria Village who do not know Jesus, there are people in West Valley who don't know Jesus, and it's the church's job to introduce them to him.

There's another new family that God wants sitting in the seats behind you. There's another new couple that God wants sitting in the empty space next to you. There's a new baby that God wants dedicated at this altar. There's a young man who just moved into the area, that God wants you to stand next to at the Lord's Supper. God wants a problem to develop in this church – God wants a BIG problem in this church: God wants there to be a lack of enough places to sit, as more and more people come to this place.

Because of the life of Christ in *you*, God's people, others will meet Jesus at West Valley Church. Jesus didn't die for a building. Jesus died for *people*. We must never forget that. As important as a building is to help us in our mission, the building is not the church. YOU are. This building is not a sacred place. This is a place where sacred things happen, as the people of God worship Him and serve each other and introduce people to Jesus.

Some of you are asking what will happen next in our partnership with Victoria.

I'm very excited to announce something new:

A regular attender of our church has made a single donation to create a fund that will be used (primarily) for singles mothers (although can include single fathers) of Victoria Village, through Victoria Church of the Nazarene. The intent of this fund will be to provide either scholarships or micro-loans to enable these deserving single parents to learn skills, acquire resources, supplies, or the necessary education in order to develop a marketable skill, trade, or practice in order to better provide for herself or himself and her or his children.

The initial fund is \$10,000, thanks to a generous donor in our church. The donor wishes it to be named in honor of our dear brother and friend in Victoria who passed away, Simon Paul. In the days to come, we will be working with Dr. Porter and Pastor Alert, and also Nazarene Compassionate Ministries to establish the Simon Paul Fund. We'll create the application requirements and disbursement structure and policies.

We also committed to continue to send all proceeds from our café to Victoria Church for the next three years, and we hope to be able to take more work and witness trips in the future, although they will be primarily for ministry – evangelistic services, Vacation Bible Schools, and maybe some light work, such as painting or landscaping. We may even be able to bring some of them up to visit us again. So we won't abandon or forget our friends – our relationship will continue. And, to make sure we don't forget them, the Victoria Church has generously given us this gift: bowls for our communion bread. These are made out of purple heart wood – a tree that is indigenous to Guyana. Every time we share communion together, we will be reminded that we are connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ in Guyana. In fact, we will do so next Sunday.

But the dedication of the building brings to a close an important chapter in the life of our church. I mentioned that I knew when I first arrived that we would need to develop a partnership with a church in a foreign field. I also knew something else; I knew that there would come a time when we would need to get rid of our mortgage and renovate some of the oldest spaces in the church. For the last seven years we purposefully set aside mortgage to focus on mission, but the time has come to get our church debt free. I'm telling you that we are preparing for a new season in the life of our church where we will move money from mortgage to ministry. In the next week, everyone who is a regular attender of our church family will receive a letter. Watch for it coming to you in the mail in the coming days.