

THE WEEK: MAY 1960

Now and then God uses failure as the basis for doing something good. Or perhaps it is more often than we realize since it has happened to me on two significant occasions. Or perhaps I fail more often than others and that gives Him more opportunities. At any rate the following is my recollection of something that happened in Billings more than 40 years ago. I had just turned 40.

We, my family and I, were attending a small church that would be considered a typical evangelical/fundamentalist group. We had been there 6 years. A friend, Louis Kramp, came to me one day in August, 1959 and said “Nothing is happening at church, let’s do something. I agreed and asked, “What should we do?” He was way ahead of me and said, “Let’s have a Saturday morning breakfast at the church and invite someone from out of town to give his testimony. In addition to being a committed follower of Jesus he should be very successful. This will do two things; if successful he will be more believable and besides he can pay his own expenses.”

Fred Heyn was also part of this conversation and I was confident they had discussed this at some length before. So when I said I agreed with them and who should we ask they both said, “That’s the problem. We don’t know either.” There probably was some discussion and we ended by agreeing to ask my dad. So an August afternoon found us in his back yard talking about it.

He had retired from a Rescue Mission/Goodwill Industries type of outreach in the inner city of Youngstown, Ohio and moved to Florida for his health. Then he and my mother moved to Billings because I was an only child and our 6 were their only grandchildren. I mention this because Abram Vereida was Executive Director of the Goodwill Industries and dad knew him in that context.

Dad didn’t have any specific idea either but he knew that Dick Halverson, Pastor of 4th Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. worked with Abram in a group called International Christian Leadership. Dad had never met Halverson (who, incidentally, later became Chaplain of the Senate) but suggested we write him and ask for any idea he might have. That was a good idea until, by a vote of 2 to 1, I was elected Secretary and my job was to write Dick.

This certainly was a thankless task since we or, at least I, expected to be brushed off by a man as busy and as prominent as he appeared to be. But having no choice I did it. A week later a reply came from Dick’s secretary saying he was in Asia and en-route to Europe and in a few days he would write us. Well, that was progress but anyone that busy wasn’t likely to bother with a few unknown men in a remote place called Billings, Montana. Were we in for a surprise! One more of the Lord’s “coincidences”. Since He “knows the end from the beginning” this was a surprise only to us.

Dick wrote to us promptly and far from dismissing us he was very enthusiastic. It probably would not be too much to say he was wildly enthusiastic. To say that we were pleasantly surprised would be masterpiece of understatement. His explanation was that he had this idea for many months and had detailed plans in mind. However, he wanted to be invited into some town by local people, which we were, rather than to invite himself and try to work up enthusiasm.

He really did have plans and he began to divulge them in his first letter. First, it was too big a project to plan for that fall and spring of 1960 would be better. Second this would not be a Saturday morning affair in a church basement but we were to consider the biggest, best place in town. Then he thanked us and said “more later”. Little did we know how much more the “more” was.

We were both elated and apprehensive. Obviously he knew what he was doing and we were reassured about that, but the biggest best place to eat in Billings then was the Northern Hotel ballroom, which could seat for a breakfast several hundred people. What were we getting into? None of us had ever done anything like this.

We exchanged letters frequently and I presume phone calls. Unfortunately I did not save the correspondence, which would have had real historical value but it was many weeks before we realized what a big deal Dick had in mind. “Oh ye of little faith”.

Probably the next stunning revelation was that not only he would come, but at least a dozen men he knew around the country would come as a team. They all would be committed Believers, all would be very successful and all would pay their own expenses. The first item caused a mild panic and the second was only mildly reassuring. And in addition we knew none of them, including Dick Halverson, had ever done this or anything like it before now!

Other revelations came in gradually: the meetings would last an entire week – Monday through Saturday – and would be 6:30-8:00 a.m. We would end on time: no one late for work because of us. No advertising – word of mouth only. No singing: no one likes to sing at 7:00 a.m., especially men. Perhaps background piano music. No clergy – this would be laymen only – Catholic, Protestant or (hopefully) nothing. Dick himself would be MC and little did we know what a beautiful job he would do day after day. Each day two of the men would each give his personal testimony.

By this time it was well into 1960 and we vacillated between elation and mild panic. As each man signed on to come he was assigned a home to live in – not to save money, but to spread them around. Finally when we could put it off no longer we reserved the Northern Hotel for the whole week of breakfasts. The hotel then gave us a small suite for the week, to pray in before and after each breakfast and to be a communication center. I should have taken a week of vacation time, but I didn’t have the presence of mind to do it.

Fred and Louis have better memories than I and as I remember it was about this time that we increased our group to seven. Did we specifically choose “seven”? Who knows? The new ones were Vernon Drake, Willis Jones and Bob Svoboda

In February 1960 we were informed that a young man named Doug Coe was going to Washington D.C. to join Abram Vereiede and Dick Halverson in what was still known as International Christian Leadership. It was a recognized non-profit corporation.

Doug’s background was as impressive as his future would be. He had a Young Life background and was active in it at the time. Also he was student body president at Willamette University where he became a close friend of the Dean of Students – Mark Hatfield. (You got it; Governor Hatfield and Senator Hatfield)

The plan was for Doug to stop in Billings en-route to Washington DC; probably to size us up, be sure we were headed in the right direction and then report to Dick. His report must have been satisfactory since we continued to get advice and instruction from Washington. As I remember the next “suggestion” was for us to increase the group to 70. Each of us was to recruit 9 men and every one of us was to buy 10 tickets to the first breakfast (\$3.50) and give them away. The only advertising was to be word-of-mouth and we were mainly interested in the 700 men who were the economic “movers and shakers” in Billings. Whether or not they had any church affiliation was immaterial. Most didn’t.

These tickets were for the Monday morning breakfast only. We hoped – and prayed – that the content of the meeting would be such that they would return. And actually this did happen. The attendance on Monday was well over 300, Tuesday perhaps 100 less and it slowly increased each day. Saturday morning was a father and son meeting and despite being Saturday it was the largest breakfast of the week. We were urged to arrange for our dozen or so guests to speak to any and every group where it could be arranged. This would include all the local service clubs and as expected every one of these groups was represented among our guests. Meetings would also include home meetings where the men were guests, Chamber of Commerce and anything else we could think of. Since several of the men came in their own planes we scheduled meetings in Helena, Miles City, Glendive and perhaps other places I don’t remember. As one looks back it is hard to realize how new and revolutionary this whole idea was. Catholics and most Protestant denominations were represented in Billings but there was little enthusiasm about declaring Jesus Christ publicly. Nor was there a really active youth activity anywhere in town. As for me, I was teaching the high school group at our church and was a miserable failure. Another reason for my interest in “doing something” as Louis suggested.

And even more interesting there was not one men's (or women's) group meeting outside of a church for bible study, prayer, fellowship, and accountability, whatever. At least that is my memory. Some 10 or 20 years later Dick Smith did a careful study and count and found that well over 100 and perhaps as many as 150 groups met publicly in local restaurants on a weekly basis. Ladies groups were meeting also but more often in homes and we had no information about them. That of course was far down the road and such an outcome of the week had not occurred to any of us. But it had occurred to Dick Halverson and he was leading us gradually in that direction. Thank God for Dick and his vision.

In March we were apprehensive enough that we felt it necessary to "practice". So we had a "dry-run" breakfast for the 70 of us. It was reasonable successful though I forget who the speaker was. Then in April we did it again and felt a little more confident. I keep reminding myself that at this point not one of us had even met Dick much less knew him.

Finally the great day arrived – the first Monday, May 1960. We and the fourteen guests and Dick were there at 5 a.m. to pray in our "war room" and then to watch as people came in. And come they did! Each one walked down the breakfast buffet and then found a seat. The ballroom gradually filled and we knew we were off and running. One interesting anecdote concerned a young man who was prominent in Montana politics. Someone had talked him into coming and he was sorry he had agreed. He parked away from the hotel and walked up the alley. Later he told us he literally pulled his hat down and turned up his coat collar to be less recognizable. When he arrived at the ballroom, he found that the men he was so worried about might see him en-route were already there! During the week he made a firm commitment to live for Jesus and did so until he was killed in an airplane crash.

Similar things happened all week long, making our work and worry worthwhile. Men played golf with the visitors, took them sightseeing, etc. and soon the "week" was the biggest thing in town. All the visitors spoke at least once at the breakfasts and some of them several times to other smaller groups – especially to home groups and service clubs. As the "week" progressed we learned that it was only a preliminary goal for Dick. His real goal was to begin the small groups I mentioned before. Obviously this was also new to us. So the subject was mentioned frequently and by Saturday morning 30 people had agreed to lead a group and were given names of those who were willing to attend. I was one of the volunteer leaders and like the others had no idea how to proceed. Nothing had ever been written on "Group Dynamics".

We learned slowly and incompletely and after a few months half of the groups had disbanded or joined another. But we did learn. Here are two lessons: "The most important things said in the group is what the individual himself says". So it is important to get everyone to say something. So if by the end of a session someone has not spoken, ask him or her a question. Usually this is an opportunity to speak when he or she was too shy to break into the discussion. Secondly – the less the group leader speaks the more others speak and the more successful the group is.

Also we learned that there are several different types of groups and they cannot easily be combined. One is the small (4-8) people that is closed. It is not, and cannot be evangelistic, but it does promote real closeness and accountability. A second is the outreach type that can grow to any size and all are welcome. Occasionally someone emerges as an interesting and dynamic speaker and people come in great numbers to hear him or her and there is very little give and take. All these apply to both men and women. Finally there are couples groups which usually meet in the evening at someone's home. Church sponsored "cell groups" are usually of this type. The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives have a variation of all of the above. It is "Geographical" in that only members of those groups are eligible to attend and each week one person volunteers to present a program and discussion follows. Members of any equivalent foreign group are welcome as guests.

Two other community wide efforts added greatly to the emphasis on small groups. Almost at the same time Young Life was introduced to Billings. It was founded in Dallas, TX in 1940 by Jim Rayburn. It is a non-denominational evangelical effort aimed at unchurched high school boys and girls. It has since become a strong international organization and we consider it very successful. One of the three main thrusts of Young Life is a weekly bible study – not co-ed – and led by an adult of the appropriate gender. These groups were to remain intact all through high school and this promoted a considerable degree of closeness.

The second was the Cursillo Movement that became prominent in the late 1960's. In addition to a long weekend of sharing and teaching they urged everyone to join a group of like-minded people – again not co-ed – who would meet weekly for personal sharing and accountability.

All three of these organizations shared in the rather remarkable proliferation of small groups in the 1960's and resulted in the 100 plus groups identified by Dick Smith. I am convinced that this was not true at that time anywhere else in the entire USA and the original 70 men may be happy and proud to be present at the beginning.

As a result of the apparent success of our "week", similar events were held in other cities – all much larger than Billings – and some of them were so successful a repeat was held a few years later. We had a series of meetings two years later and Abraham Vereide himself came as well as Dick Halverson and Doug Coe. However, it wasn't until 1977 that we got our act together and had a "Week #2". This time there were more men from out of town and we had simultaneous breakfasts at the Northern Hotel and Holiday Inn. Probably twice as many men attended because we had a larger base from which to start.

The first Presidential Prayer Breakfast was held in 1953 - President Eisenhower's first year. The details surrounding the decision to have it are interesting but not germane to this discussion. They have been held yearly since and almost always are the first Thursday in February.

Governor's Prayer Breakfasts were held here and around the country and our first one was held in 1961 in Helena. Our obvious choice as speaker was Dick Halverson but he was unable to accept. Bill Starr a rising "star" in Young Life was able to do it and thus was the first of 45. Ours were usually held the first Saturday in March and I am not sure if any other state has had that many consecutive breakfasts. I wish I were articulate enough and astute enough to describe and evaluate the cumulative effect of all these weekly meetings for all these years. However, God the Father does know and that is important.

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