

## The Wichita Metropolitan Evangelism Project

IT seems like it's time to write up a simple account of the events that have led to the development of a multi-faceted evangelistic effort in Wichita, Kansas. The story is a bit convoluted at times, but that's the way life goes. I don't always understand it. But then, I don't always need to understand it; I do need to honor God's principles and respond to His leading.

As far as my personal involvement goes, the first event of immediate interest was in October of 2007. I was preparing a series of presentations on Adventist History. I'd been invited to speak at Oklahoma Academy, and—separately—at Advent Hope in Loma Linda a few weeks later. With a little effort, I figured I could make a single series that would work in both settings.

In the process, I used a quotation from Ellen White that got me to thinking. The key sentence is, “Entire surrender to the Lord is something that is revealed in the daily life, and it exerts an influence upon other lives.” —*Bible Training School*, May 1, 1904

It may seem like a bit of a stretch, but that sentence made me wonder if I might not accomplish more for the Lord's work by simply going out and setting an example of active service, rather than continuing to teach. I was thinking of all the students I've had in twenty years of teaching, and it bugged me that most of them seemed to be “good Adventist kids” who weren't doing anything particularly evil, but they also weren't doing anything particularly significant for the Lord's work. There were exceptions, of course, but as a general rule....

Now, just hold that thought; we'll come back to it in a little while.

One of the presentations I gave touched on the history of Loma Linda, and in the course of the story I mentioned that the original real estate project had been called “Mound City.” When I said that down at OA, it lit a light bulb in the mind of a gentleman in the audience.

George Vigneron has been a friend since 1991 when my wife and I went to OA as staff. In early 2006, George had gone out to Banning, California, to attend the last session of the Desert Hot Springs school started by Dr. Charles Thomas. When the term ended, and the school was closing down, Mrs. Thomas came to George with a problem. She had a bunch of old notebooks jammed full of “stuff.” They had been given to her husband some years before he died by a “little, old German nurse” from Loma Linda. They represented her lifework, and she had entrusted them to Dr. Thomas, hoping that he could find a way to make them of value in the Lord's work.

Dr. Thomas accepted this charge in good faith and with good intentions, but he died and the boxes remained in storage. Now the school was closing, and Mrs. Thomas had no idea what to do with all these boxes. Well, one idea. Would George take them and try to see that some value came of them?

George said he would, loaded the boxes on his trailer, and hauled them back to Oklahoma. After a quick look into a couple of boxes, he put them in storage until he could figure out what to do with them. All he could tell was that it was a bunch of old, Adventist history stuff. The one thing that stuck in his mind was a picture of two men standing next to a sign that said “Mound City,” a place he had never heard of.

And that's why the light went on. Afterward, he came to me and told me about the boxes and the “little, old German nurse.” I asked him, “Are you talking about Leah Schmitke?”

“Hmmm,” he said, “I may have seen a name like that in there somewhere.”

I had met Mrs. Schmitke in the fall of 1980, and though I didn't know her well, I did know a bit about her work and publications and I was confident that I would at least find items of interest—if not of great value—in her files, so the boxes soon made the journey to Kansas.

Now, just hold that thought; we'll come back to it at the end.

By November of 2007 I felt certain that it was time to make a change. Other factors had come into my considerations, but trying to exert a positive influence by doing something more dramatically faith-based and evangelistic remained a key part of my thinking. So I gave the school board chairman a heads up that I'd probably be moving on after the '07-'08 school year, and the board should start looking for a new principal. What was I going to do? Well, that wasn't certain—maybe go overseas.

In March, I talked with Jeff Reich of Laymen Ministry News about possible volunteer positions in the Philippines. Yes, there were needs that we might fill, and he'd be happy to talk again after he got back from a six-week trip—if we were certain that that was what God was calling us to do.

So we figured we would be going somewhere, but really didn't feel any pressure to decide exactly where that would be. My wife and I had friends who had worked (and some who were still working) with David Gates and GMI down in South America, so that had some appeal too. But it just never seemed like it was the right time to finalize plans.

When school was over at the end of May, it was obvious that some decision really should be made sometime soon. After all, my contract ended in July and there wouldn't be any paychecks coming after that. So we made some phone calls to LMN and GMI again and explored ideas. But still, it just didn't seem to gel into anything final.

The first Sabbath in July, I had the vespers program at church on Sabbath evening. I showed some pictures of the Philippines and Guyana and told a bit about our still uncertain plans. In the process, I mentioned the idea of trying to inspire others by just doing something myself. A few days later, I was standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes, and just replaying everything through my mind. One thing that had been bothering me was that neither Clarissa nor I had what you could describe as a "burden" for the Philippines or Guyana or any other place as such. We supported the good things being done in all these mission fields, and believed we

could be happy doing our best to contribute to that work, but... no "burden."

The one place that I had always had a burden for was North America. Ever since I knew enough to have any serious thought on such things, I've always felt that revival and reformation in North America was the "great challenge" to be met. My study of Adventist History may have strengthened this, since most of the events I've studied in depth occurred here.

Anyway, I was washing dishes and thinking about all this, when something sort of clicked into position. I didn't have a burden for these other places, because my real burden was for North America. I was actually taking my family overseas, not so much for the work overseas, but because I was hoping that our influence would help stir things up in North America.

Well, that was momentarily gratifying, in a philosophical sort of way. At least it made a little more sense. But it didn't last long. Within thirty seconds or so, I was wondering what would happen if we succeeded. What if we actually managed to inspire fifty people to do something themselves—what would they do?

I half jokingly said to myself, "Well, I suppose they'd all ship out to the Philippines or South America or somewhere." And North America would still be here....

Now a lot has been said in recent years about how the health of the "home church" is related to its support of the "mission field," and I don't mean to contradict that general idea. But still, there is something to be said for actually getting an active work going here in North America rather than just a more passive supportive role for someone doing the Lord's work "over there."

And then came a new idea: What North America really needed was for someone to show that the same principles of aggressive effort and confident dependence on God's provision for His work that had accomplished such good things out in the mission fields would also work here. What North America needed was an "extreme faith" sort of venture, one in which common laymen could push forward God's work in His way while depending on Him to provide for its needs.

To me—because of the things I’ve studied in Adventist History—the answer seemed obvious: Someone needed to revive company evangelism, and show that the divine plan for working our large cities can actually succeed. That’s exactly what North America needs, I thought. Someone really ought to do that.

You can probably see where this is heading. By the time I had another bowl cleaned up, the obvious question was, “So why don’t *you* do it, Dave?”

The obvious answer was that I didn’t have the financial resources to make it happen. And the obvious rebuttal was that “extreme faith” didn’t wimp out over issues like that. So I began to ponder the idea. What if I asked Bible workers to volunteer? After all, my family was willing to consider going off to the far corners of the earth as essentially unpaid volunteers. So why shouldn’t some recent AFCEC or Mission College, or ARISE graduates be willing to come to Wichita and work on a similar basis?

If I got a decent job somewhere, could I supply room and board (*maybe even gas money?*) for three or four or five Bible workers? It wasn’t much, perhaps, but it *was* something God had called for as a part of working the larger cities from outpost centers. If God would bless that little project, it would at least give Him opportunity to show that He still appreciates it when we try to do something for Him, and try to do it the way He asked us to.

This was all a new thought for me, but it was not just out of the clear blue sky. I had read all sorts of history that touched on this idea, from Ellen White refusing to talk to Elder Daniells because of his neglect of city evangelism, to her enthusiasm for Elder Simpson’s city work in California, to the special work of “Gospel Medical Missionary Evangelism” (her words) for the cities that she envisioned coming out of the “College of Medical Evangelists.”

Plus, I knew something of Elder J.H.N. Tindall’s “Field School of Evangelism,” his mentorship of W.D. Frazee’s largely volunteer company evangelism work in the 1920s and ’30s, and of the passing on of that vision from Elder Frazee to Mark Finley and Brad Thorp. In the 1970s and ’80s, Pastor Thorp and a co-worker

used their two salaries to support a team of eight or ten workers in the original Radiant Living Seminars outside Vancouver, B.C. I had friends who worked with that team; my wife’s brother and sister-in-law were team members; and it’s Brad’s signature that made our marriage certificate valid. All this was in the back of my mind, as the idea of re-igniting full-scale, outpost-based, company evangelism was taking shape.

There was, of course, one very practical difficulty: I couldn’t provide a place for Bible workers to live in my house because it just didn’t have enough rooms. If I was going to do anything along this line, I would need to rent a bigger house. I needed to talk to Larry Cook, the one member of our local church who knew more about the Wichita real estate market than any other.

Perhaps right here I should toss in a brief description of Ellen White’s large-picture concept of city evangelism. It isn’t based primarily around your normal evangelistic series. She calls for “centers of influence” to be established in the large cities. But what is a “center of influence”? Hunt long enough and you’ll find that it pretty much boils down to vegetarian restaurants, health food stores, medical treatment rooms, and a judicious ministry for the poorer classes.

The people running all these nice enterprises are ideally supposed to live—not in the city—but in an “outpost” somewhere outside the city environment. Working along with them is to be a team of Bible workers—also from an outpost. And, in an ideal case, even farther out of town (or at least on a more “regional” basis rather than outside every city) is to be a wellness center (what used to be known as a sanitarium) to provide more involved health services and reinforce the spiritual impact of all of the above.

Now one thing to remember about all this is that it’s hardly ever (if ever) been done. Each part, yes; but the whole picture, rarely if ever. Stacked up against this ideal, my little group of Bible workers was barely a drop in the bucket—but it was as far as I could stretch my imagination at the time.

That next Sabbath, I didn’t say anything to Larry. After all, we’d been saying for months

that we were going overseas, and it just seemed too flighty to reverse course so fast, especially in pursuit of an idea that might not be easily understood or appreciated by many people. But the idea didn't go away.

By the next Sabbath, July 19, I was more settled in my plan to ask Larry about housing. Still, the day had pretty nearly passed by without anything that seemed like the *right* moment. The Sabbath evening vespers program had ended when I saw Larry heading into the fellowship hall. I followed along, thinking that this *might* be the time. Before I could ask him, however, he said, "Hey, Dave, do you have a minute? I need to ask you a question."

"Sure," I said, "and I've got a question for you, too."

Larry Cook and his wife, Susan, have been church members for about six years. He has run a number of businesses over the years, and is a straight-forward, no nonsense sort of guy. He likes to get things done. But he's come to value the idea of getting things—especially spiritual things—done *right*. And when he isn't sure how to go about a certain job, he's learned to hire someone who understands that particular process. Roughly speaking, that's why he wanted to talk to me.

"Dave," he said, "ever since I've been a member of Three Angels, I've heard people talk about starting a vegetarian restaurant and health food store in Wichita. And I've read about learning to garden, and living out in the country during the little time of trouble, and working the cities from outpost centers. But nobody seems to be doing it.

"I don't like to sit around. If those are things we need to do, I want to get on with it. And if it's going to be done, it needs to be done right. But I don't know all the counsel there is on that sort of thing, so this afternoon I was praying about who I could get to work for me on this project, and your name came to mind. I know you're planning on leaving, but if you're going to be around for even a few more weeks, I was wondering if I could hire you to help me get this project off on the right foot."

He explained that he had a possible store building already under construction. He had

been going to lease it out, but it could just as easily go for this project. And as far as living in the country, he was closing on a 160-acre farm about 60 miles east of town the next Wednesday.

At this point, I was thinking two things: #1, this guy has bitten off a *huge* chunk to chew on, and #2, if you put his ideas (restaurant, store, possible treatment rooms, wellness center at a country outpost) together with my one little idea (company evangelism team and a few colporteurs, engaged in full time, long term evangelism), *you are getting very close to the whole plan for working the cities*. That, my friends, was a very cool thought.

Well, I told him my idea of having a house full of Bible Workers, and pointed out how nicely that would dovetail with the restaurant work. And—to make an already long story a little less long—we decided to take a shot at it. So now I'm working for Larry Cook, primarily laying plans and making arrangements for the opening of *Sprouts*, hopefully sometime in May of 2009.

One of our key goals is to develop an operation that can be reproduced and exported. There are details not yet in place, of course, but there have been many encouraging developments. Among them:

- The restaurant building is nearly finished. Basically we just need to locate and install a few more pieces of equipment.
- The farm house on the outpost property is renovated and the farm manager (Clint Pier) is gearing up for the growing season. His wife (Lauralee, a Licensed Massage Therapist and experienced lifestyle educator) will join us in June.
- Miguel Larcher (pronounced "Lar-shay") a genuine born- and educated-in-France, French Vegan Chef with fifteen years' experience (and one year as a Bible Worker in Michigan) and Nadine, his like-minded wife (an R.N.), have agreed to join us. More than cook for the restaurant, he wants to operate a culinary school, training chefs for other restaurants and institutions. This is essential if this sort of effort is to be replicated "in every city." See

*Christian Service, 72; Counsels on Health, 468; Evangelism, 69; etc., etc.*

- Through a series of providential events, we have two relatively new Adventists living in Eureka (eleven miles north of the wellness center) who are interested in helping with that end of the project. One of these is an R.N., N.D.

And those boxes from Leah Schmitke? I finally started looking at them in September 2008. One highlight is an ongoing correspondence over forty or more years between Mrs. Schmitke and Ella Robinson (Ellen White's granddaughter). Mrs. Robinson thought highly of Mrs. Schmitke's material, and hoped to see it published (better yet, implemented) someday.

The main thrust of her work is what the church used to call "the Benevolent Work." In other words, "Isaiah 58" and "Matthew 25"—"loose the bonds of wickedness,... undo the heavy burdens,... share bread with the hungry,... bring the poor who are cast out to your house,... cover the naked,... feed the hungry,... give a drink to the thirsty,... take in strangers,... visit the sick and those in prison."

When I had read enough of her materials to begin concluding that she had a valid point, I was uncertain how—or even if—we could actually put anything like that into practice. Notice the irony here:

"A store?"

"Sure."

"A restaurant?"

"Not a problem."

"A bakery?"

"We can do it."

"Be kind to people in the neighborhood?"

"Hmmm... that's a bit complicated. I'll have to get back to you on that."

It seems pretty ludicrous when it's put that way, but it's the truth. The problem, of course,

is trying to avoid throwing resources into a bottomless and unproductive pit. Indeed, there is Spirit of Prophecy counsel on this point. But there's a lot more counsel that leans toward encouraging judicious generosity. The tricky question is how to implement the "judicious" element.

When I first began to see importance in making this practical ministry a part of our project, I didn't know how to go about it, nor did I know if Larry would have any interest in that sort of thing. So I kept reading notebooks and thinking things over. Then one day in the middle of October, Larry said, "Hey Dave, I've been thinking about this church I own. I think we should use it for some sort of practical ministry in the city."

Turns out he owns a church in downtown Wichita. True, it's an old church with quite a few needed repairs, but it's also a really big church with a *bunch* of rooms. (I lost count when he took me through on a tour.)

Are we looking at a homeless shelter? A soup line for the Great Depression, version 2.0? An employment assistance center? And—more ominously (tense background music here, please)—why does this church have a genuine nuclear warfare fallout shelter in the basement?

We really don't know. To be honest, I've never paid much attention to the book *Welfare Ministry*, but it's near the top of my reading list right now.

Maybe the church won't be a big part of anything. But our vision has been expanded to include what Ellen White described as "of the highest importance" and "our work." *Counsels on Health, 521.*

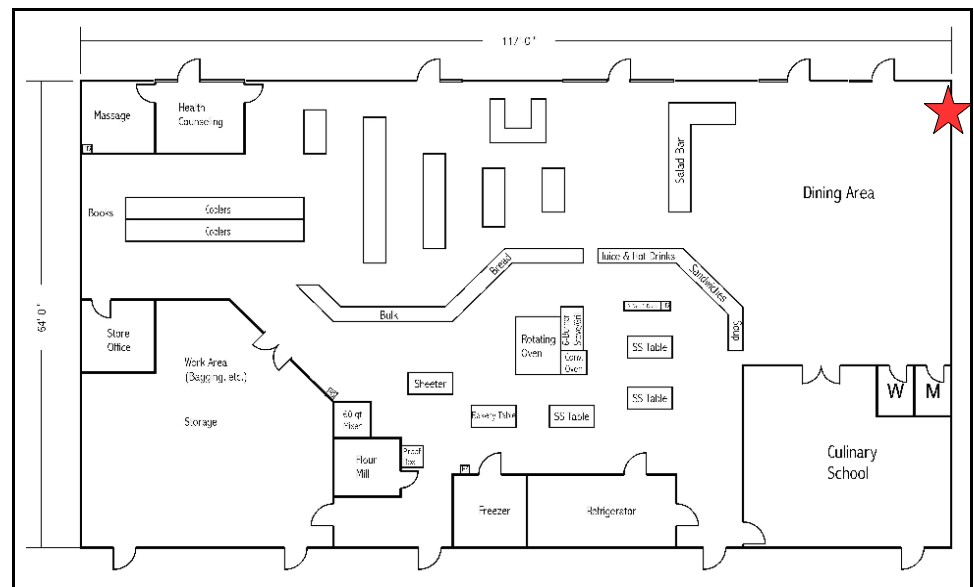
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P.S. I'll drop in a few pictures.

Here's the restaurant building. We will be in the four sections to the left. The one on the far right is leased to Budget Rental Car. The dimensions of our section of the building are 64 feet front to back, and 117 feet side to side. For those who know Wichita, the address is 1812 S Seneca (1.1 miles south of Kellogg Ave.) On the right is the sign, now in place above the building's center door.

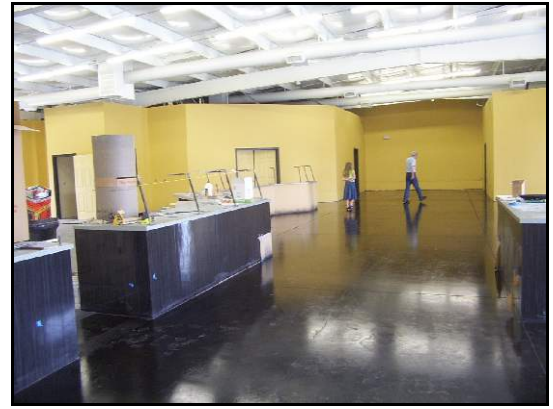


This is the floor plan for the store building. The front of the building is to the top. The long counter in the middle is only chest high, which means the kitchen and bakery are wide open to view. Our thought is that it will enhance the interest of the customers, and their identification with the food and store. The culinary school, in the lower right corner, has a glass double door, so it's somewhat visible but more or less sound proof.



This composite photo (February 2009) was taken from a ladder about where the red star is on the floor plan above. The kitchen, bakery, and store area look smaller than they really are. The bakery should be especially interesting, with flour mill, bread mixer, dough sheeter, and revolving oven all easily seen from in front of the counter.

Here's a more recent look at the restaurant, after the floor had been finished. You can see that the laminate hadn't been put on the far counter yet. Larry's workers welded up the metal supports for the counter "sneeze guard" from scratch. It took a while, but they are all perfectly laser-aligned now. That's important, since tempered glass doesn't bend well.



This is the house at the wellness center. Downstairs has a large kitchen and an even larger living room (for Bible studies, health talks, and the like). Upstairs are three good-sized bedrooms. "Health guests" will stay in the not-yet-renovated dairy barn. It should make a nice duplex.



And here's a shot of the house in its context (it's the one to the right—the other two are barns). The horizon looks a lot like Kansas, but there is actually about a 100-foot difference in elevation between the level of the house and the top of the ridge that this shot was taken from. A hundred feet may not be much, but it's enough to give health guests a bit of a work out, and it gives a nice view.



This is the main sanctuary in the church building. There is also a smaller one, downstairs.

The strangest thing about the church is the half dozen or more rooms with these funny little cubbyholes. Just big enough for a cot or two....

