

HOPE IS RISING

Ray Van Gilst – Encounter 2019 District Conference

October 1, 2017. A gunman opens fire on a music festival in Las Vegas killing 59 people and wounding 422. Loved ones of our South Hills Church Community in Henderson were there, immediately putting them in the middle of ministering to traumatized concert goers. Pastor Steve Allison of our Liberian Church in Las Vegas was called in as a nurse to treat those wounded, and described the scene as a “war zone.”

Seven days later on October 9, 2017 a fire roared through Santa Rosa on 70 mph winds, killing 43 people, and destroying nearly 3000 homes. Of those homes burned, 4 belonged to our pastors, and another 50 belonged to Alliance families. This disaster affected 6 of our churches directly.

Just over 5 months after that on March 19, 2018, we were made aware that we as the CPD were dangerously close to insolvency. That was followed on April 10 by making emergency, traumatic cuts to our staff.

This is the first time I have had the opportunity to say publicly what I have been communicating in other ways. The fact of the matter is – what happened, happened on my watch – I take full responsibility for the failure we experienced, and I want to say, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for the stress and damage it caused to our Staff and DexCom and District.” When I found out last March that we were on the brink of insolvency I immediately realized that our financial issues were only a symptom of a lack of proper systems, bylaws, policies, accountability, and leadership. The financial realities also made it necessary to make some staff changes that were painful for everyone involved.

And let me say it one more time - no, the money was not stolen. It was used for the right things – just not in the right way. It was used without regard for reality.

Over the past year we (our DexCom and Staff) have been working hard to put those systems in place – many of which are new to us as the CPD. It has been a tremendous amount of work, and you may have felt at times like we weren’t as available as we had been. It has been a huge project – but I think we have placed

the CPD in a much healthier place, and prepared us for a bright future. Myself, our staff, and DexCom are all operating with a new level of excellence and accountability, as I trust we all strive to do in the CPD family.

I no longer make assumptions. The bank statement is on my desk every month. With all these things and more that our treasurer – Frank – will share with you, we have been running in the black since October.

And to make sure we continue on a path of accountability, we have joined the ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability). This organization is recommended by the C&MA to hold our National and District Offices accountable.

You never fully appreciate the necessity for such systems and policies – till you need them. Till the whole thing crashes and you are left figuring out what happened. Add to that picture the reality of *you don't know what you don't know*, and the whole thing is exacerbated even more.

During this time, we have needed God's presence like never before. We have had to rely on God's strength and wisdom to construct the foundation needed to build upon for the future of the CPD. We have found and fixed a number of things over the past year which we will go into in more detail. We will also include a Q & A time in our business session this afternoon, so you will want to be there for that.

Speaking of which, let me diverge just a little here with a story. When Thomas Edison and his staff were developing the incandescent light bulb, it took hundreds of hours to manufacture a single bulb. One day, after finishing a bulb, he handed it to an errand runner and asked him to take it upstairs to the testing room. As he turned and started up the stairs, he stumbled and fell, and the bulb shattered on the steps.

Instead of rebuking him, Edison reassured him and then turned to his staff and told them to start working on another bulb. When it was completed several days later, Edison walked over to the same errand runner, handed him the bulb, and said, "Please take this up to the testing room." I know how he felt. I feel like I stumbled with the CPD finances – it happened on my watch. I want to thank you for the overwhelming amount of expressions of support in the wake of the news about our finances. You have trusted me to continue to carry our finances. I trust I am learning to carry them well.

Moving on - Nearly 4 months later on July 26, 2018, the Carr fire jumped the Sacramento river, rushing into Redding killing 8 people and destroying 1077 homes. While none of those homes belonged to our pastors this time, around 50 of those homes did belong to our Alliance families. This disaster directly affected 6 of our churches. This fire became personal for us as our daughter and son in law also had to evacuate. For several days they and two other families stayed with us in Sacramento till it was safe to go back home. As many of you can understand, the sense of relief to have them out of harm's way was overwhelming.

And some of you had personal things to bear on top of everything else. The smoke from the Carr Fire had not cleared yet when I got word that my mom had passed away, so we found ourselves in Iowa for her funeral the middle of August. And several of you have let me know that you also lost parents and other loved ones. And of course, we heard from Doug just last night about his year-long battle with cancer.

Just 3 months later on November 8, 2018 the most devastating wildfire in California history all but wiped out our town of Paradise killing 85 people - including 3 who call Paradise Alliance Church (PAC) their home church. It destroyed 514 businesses and 14,000 homes. Of 23 staff at PAC, 17 lost homes including the lead pastor. Between our Paradise and Chico churches, approximately 300 homes were lost.

While the church building in Paradise was spared, the congregation was only finally able to resume regular services there over 3 months later on February 10 because of smoke damage and loss of utility infrastructure. About two thirds of the congregation will not be returning to the community and have re-located.

What I have just described to you took place in just 13 months. Of our 106 churches, 16 have been directly affected by trauma or disaster. 21 of our pastors have lost homes. 400 of our Alliance families lost their homes, and thousands of our CPD family were affected by evacuations, displacement, and severe trauma.

Quite frankly, I'm more than a little incredulous at the amount of stress our CPD family went through in just over one year's time as trauma upon trauma just kept coming. And I think it has affected us in more ways than we realize. I know it has affected me in profound ways.

In the middle of all this I was talking with Michael and Kathryn Redman of Half a Bubble Out one day and I made the comment, "I'm looking forward to getting back to normal." Michael looked at me and said, "Define 'normal' for me." At that moment I realized I had no idea what "normal" looked like anymore. So many of you have told me, "That was a horrible year," or, "I feel like I lost a year." I'm with you on both counts.

Donice and I have been through very difficult things in our ministry over the last 38 years – yes, I know I don't look it, but it really has been that long 😊

And I know from experience that God uses those things in our lives. As I've said of some of the more difficult things we have been through in our lives and ministry, "While I would not want to go through that again, having gone through it, I would not trade it because of what God taught me through it, and because of what God did in me through it." Those difficult 13 months are no exception.

And I would be less than honest if I were to read Jeremiah 29:11 without a hint of cynicism, "*For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you **hope** and a future.*" Do I know that's true? Absolutely! That doesn't mean I always feel like it. And it sure doesn't mean that I always express it. But the fact of the matter is, He is giving **hope**. **Hope** is rising!

Pastor Josh Gallagher of Paradise Alliance Church has been through more than most of us, and has said some things that are very apropos to our situation overall. He said this, "*I have been amazed at how God enters into our grief with us. Many times, when we have to go through things, we feel like we can't question God, and if we question God, he's not going to like us. I'm letting the people in my congregation and my community know, it's OK to be angry with God. You can still love him. It's OK to question him and still have faith at the exact same time. It's OK to be mad at God and tell him what you think, and he's still going to love you.*"

*Letting people know that message brings a lot of hope and encouragement because it helps me realize, "Wow, God really can relate with the situation that I'm in, the real emotions that I have, and what I'm feeling." I simply tell our people, if you want a real relationship with God you need to be real with God, and that has given people a lot of **hope** and encouragement. And instead of destroying their faith I think it's actually helped define their faith. I am here – WE are here "for such a time as this!" **Hope** is rising! (thank you for that Josh)*

James knew of that as he wrote in James 1:2-4, "My fellow believers, when it seems as though you are facing nothing but difficulties, see it as an invaluable opportunity to experience the greatest joy that you can! For you know that when your faith is tested it stirs up power within you to endure all things. And then as your endurance grows even stronger it will release perfection into every part of your being until there is nothing missing and nothing lacking."

Athletes have an expression, "No pain, no gain." It really is a pleasant thought that we can develop character without trials. But it doesn't appear as though that happens. In fact, A.W. Tozer has made the statement, "There are people within the ranks of Christianity who have been taught and who believe that Christ will shield His followers from wounds of every kind. If the truth be known, the saints of God in **every** age were only effective *after* they had been wounded."

So as I bid an enthusiastic farewell to those 13 months, I may not do it with fondness, but I *will* do it with a realization of the value it has had for my spiritual growth and personal growth. **Hope** is rising!

Do you know that He wants to prepare us for a great **hope** filled future!? And He will use the means He needs to, to get us to where we need to go – to do what we are called to do! *Isaiah 43:18 & 19, which is the theme verse for our conference, "Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."* This is our God! He opens roads where there are none. Brings life where there is death. Makes new beginnings when everything is over. With faith and **hope**, we need to take hold of His hand and walk with Him, because He has something new for us. The Lord sees things differently. **Hope** is rising.

Nearly 38 years ago John Stumbo and I moved to Jeffrey City, WY to start a church in that small, isolated, uranium mining town. Three days after we arrived – after

praying for Jeffrey City for 9 months – totally convinced we were supposed to plant a church there – Western Nuclear, the company that owned the mine, laid off the entire work force. Overnight we watched the townspeople leave, and if you drive through today, 38 years later, it is a ghost town. Obviously we were not going to plant a church there (unless we were able to evangelize the thousands of antelope around town), so we left for Evanston, WY, about 300 miles to the southwest, on the Utah border.

Thankfully Evanston stayed put, and today there is a healthy church there that has had a significant impact on the Alliance as a whole. Donice and I continued to plant and help plant churches all over southwestern Wyoming, southern Idaho, southern Nevada, and Utah. Anything that could be called the Inter-Mountain region. Or as we fondly referred to it “Behind the Zion Curtain.”

A few years after Doug Swinburne became our D.S. he asked me to come on board as the Church Planting Director. Little did we know that about the time I came on in that role our planting funds would dry up because of something we now know as the Great Recession. So we continued forward with the challenge of planting churches with no resources and saw 23 churches planted in 8 years.

Ask me if I am ABSOLUTELY convinced of God’s plan and provision! You better believe it. If there is one thing I can tell you for sure from years of experience, it is that our God is God of the miraculous!

In my first 3 years in this role we saw some great wins. Our stats were healthy in a lot of ways. Admittedly, the past year has been more one of recalibrating. Never fun, but sometimes necessary. But I firmly believe God is using the challenges of the past year to make our next years the best ever for the CPD! *“Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”*

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What is the basis for that hope, and what does that hope look like this coming year? How do we move forward? Several things come to mind. Perseverance, creativity, faith filled risk, Holy Spirit empowerment! In other words, the same

way we ALWAYS have! What other way do you move forward with a God given dream?

Thank you for all you have done in 2018 - I know it was a difficult year in a lot of ways. But I also know without the shadow of a doubt that He uses seasons like what we have been through (finances, fires, violence, etc.), to prepare us for the bright future He has for the CPD. Thank you for being a part of that! As a result, I firmly believe we are poised for growth as we begin 2019. He is going to do it through YOU. And through YOUR church. Through US as we work together!

And speaking of how we have worked together and been there for each other, Josh Gallagher and the Paradise Alliance Staff, would you please come up here? (A check for \$250,000 was presented to them from the CPD because of individuals and churches who have contributed for Camp Fire relief)

I want us to start asking a new question, "How can we dream TOGETHER?" Because I know that anything we do has to start with a God given dream as we are open to what He wants to do in our district. "How does He want us to dream together?" And when you are dreaming, please realize it can be in ANY area. I'm not asking you to do anything with the answers just yet. Just ask the questions and see what God does.

But I don't want to just dream about what God has for us over the next year. I want to dream about what the next 5 - 10 years could look like for the CPD as we prepare for the amazing future God has for us! We have accomplished much over the past few years with the engagement that we currently have from you, our churches. What could we accomplish with 100% engagement? What could we do for the Kingdom in the years ahead if we are all dreaming together, working together, and giving together?

"Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

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We are currently developing some metrics for the goals we feel God is giving us for the years to come, and while we may not have those in place just yet, I can

assure you that what we are working on are BHAGs. “Ray, what on earth is a BHAG?!” In case you have never heard of that term, it stands for BIG HAIRY ADACIOUS GOALS! Things we can ONLY do through the supernatural power of God!

I’m specifically thinking of the churches we could plant, the strategic partnerships we could facilitate with our Alliance family overseas, scholarships to prepare women and men for ministry through our own Simpson University, Tozer Seminary, and some of the equipping ministries our churches are doing – like what Brian Long will be sharing about what Foothills church is dreaming of. *Empowered leaders, thriving churches, transformed world!*

Did you know that just of our California population – not counting our other states, that 39% is of Hispanic background? And that percentage is growing at a significantly faster rate than the population as a whole.

Of our 18 current church plants, 8 are Hispanic, and we now have 14 Hispanic congregations. As you can see in the report booklet, that has increased by 9 in just the last two years! Edgar Castro has shifted into high gear with his vision and connections for planting Hispanic churches. And we are standing with him! Just a couple weeks ago they had the first of a series of trainings in church planting, and over 40 students attended! That number is already slated to be over 70 for the next session which means they have officially outgrown the district office and are looking for another venue. We have a lot of catch-up to do when it comes to our Hispanic community, but thanks to the efforts of Edgar and our Hispanic Pastors, we are seeing major inroads made into that community.

And even though we don’t have a church planting director, you have a DS who has been in the planting world for 38 years and has not lost his passion for it. Joining me in that passion is our church planting team of Nathan Edwardson, Ted Kang, Tim Agnello, Mike Mitchum, and of course Edgar Castro. What is contained in the report booklet is the overview of a pathway that is still being worked on, but one that we have great hope for in creating a viable process that will allow our plants to flourish.

The other part of our dream is that as we develop a culture of raising up emerging leaders, we have out of that, church planters and international workers to fulfill our need of workers for the harvest.

We are doing a tremendous amount with what we have. But what could we do if we had that full 5%?

The story is that a church was in a building project, but they had run short on funds. The pastor got up and said to the congregation, “The good news is that we have all the money we need to finish our project. The bad news is that it is still in your wallets.” I’m here to tell you this morning the good news that we have all the money we need to expand the kingdom by planting churches and sending missionaries. The bad news is that it is still in the bank accounts of our churches.

When Donice and I were planting churches in and around Utah, we felt that one of our **spiritual** (not just financial) priorities and values was to make sure we gave the full 5% that had been agreed to by our CPD churches. Our tithe if you will. Our **covenant**. How many of you realize things get just as tight in church plants as they do for established churches, or churches that are involved in building campaigns? YUP. But we were faithful – and so was God.

I want to challenge you this morning as CPD churches to be faithful to God through the commitment, the **covenant** we have made as CPD churches. As a district, our stats are actually decent. There are many of us who are making and keeping that commitment. But there are enough of us who aren’t that we are many thousands of dollars away from expanding the Kingdom through planting and missions.

You will see in the report booklet that we are the 4th highest giving district in the nation for the Great Commission Fund. While that is something to celebrate, it’s not good enough! With the wealth and resources we have been given by God, we need to be number one! Do I hear an AMEN?!

You might say, “But we are using it in our community to expand the Kingdom here.” That sounds just like what A.B. Simpson would have said, doesn’t it? I DON’T THINK SO! In his time they sacrificed finances, they sacrificed time, they sacrificed personal agendas, they sacrificed position. They even sacrificed their

lives! Thirty missionaries lost their lives in Africa alone as they were establishing the Kingdom of God in that lost land. What will we give – what will we SACRIFICE to reach unreached people beyond our own communities, and beyond our own country?!

Dr. Stumbo recently asked, “Will we invest our lives in that which outlives us? Will we give ourselves to those important things that will be here far beyond us – or far beyond our churches?”

Early in the Alliance, one of the mottos that Dr. Simpson used was seen on a banner – **“God is counting on you.”** I’m here to tell you the same thing. **“God is counting on you – and He is counting on your church.”** To be focused on something besides you, and beyond your community! I guess my question boils down to, “Do we really believe in the Alliance – and the CPD - as an Acts 1:8 movement – is that who we are? Then what are we doing about it?!”

Are we going to move forward into what God has for us as a district family? I hope your answer is yes! And I hope that a yes answer means being a part of that in prayer, in unity, in working together, and in giving!

Awhile back I was with CA 8th District Assemblyman Ken Cooley (who more importantly happens to be the father of two of our workers – Phil of Cordova Neighborhood Church, and Bryce of Foothills Church). And his wife Sydney volunteered to rebuild our books last spring after our crash. He was telling me about his favorite building in the capital complex - the north office building just across the street to the west from the capital building. Across the top facade of the building there is engraved, “Bring me Men to match my mountains.”



As he went on to tell me the story behind that saying, he said, if you think about the shape of the Sierras, they are like a wall to the east while they are more of a slope to the west. That wall was what the wagon trains had to transverse to come to CA. They had to cross the Truckee river 23 times in their trek up the mountains. The oxen had to pull the wagons through the cold water so long that their hooves were softened by the water and they bellowed in pain as they were forced to pull. At one point they came face to face with an 18-foot vertical wall. After searching for a way through, they finally found a crevasse in the wall that would allow for one ox at a time to go through. Once up, they tied ropes to the wagons and hoisted them up one at a time. That was the kind of perseverance the CA pioneers exhibited. And that's what we need today – just empowered – supernaturally - by the Holy Spirit.

For us as believers and for those who wish to make a difference for the Kingdom of God in the CPD, it is going to take more than the perseverance that those pioneers showed. Their goal was just a better life for themselves and their families (noble enough). But our goal is the eternal destination of millions. We really have no choice but to continually experience and rely upon a power greater than our own.

As eight people gathered around a wood stove on a cold November day in 1881 in New York City, they admitted that they were “few and poor and weak”; they “thrust themselves upon the power of the Holy Spirit,” and The Alliance was born.

We, Alliance family, CPD family, are those to whom in Acts 1:8, Jesus promises the empowerment for the assignment He has given.

Please understand that everything I ever challenge you to be and do can be accomplished only by complete dependence upon and participation with the Holy Spirit of God - His guidance, character, anointing, and power in our lives. After all, if you can do any of this on your own, is it really worth doing?! It HAS to be supernatural – we serve the God of the supernatural. I don't WANT to do anything I could do without the Holy Spirit!

“Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

Hope is what? RISING!