



FEBRUARY 2020

## GREETINGS FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

The annual meeting of the Community of the Cross of Nails, North America, was held October 24-27, 2019, at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Lookout Mountain, TN. Members of the Board met Thursday evening for dinner and fellowship, before the business meeting on Friday morning.

Following the business meeting, the Board gathered together with members of the Ed Johnson Project. In March 1906, Ed Johnson was wrongfully convicted for the rape of a white woman and sentenced to death. After the Supreme Court issued a stay of his execution, on March 19, 1906, Ed Johnson was mob-lynched from the second span of the Walnut Street Bridge in Chattanooga, TN. Mr. Johnson's last words spoken to the mob who lynched him were, "God bless you, I am a innocent man."

When we decided to hold our Board meeting in the Chattanooga area, I wanted to highlight a local ministry that emphasized reconciliation, the core ministry of CCN. At the heart of the reconciliation ministry of CCN is the three-fold commitment to healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity, and building a culture of peace.

The mission of the Ed Johnson Project is to promote **remembrance, reconciliation, and unity**. To introduce CCN to the Ed Johnson Project seemed like a holy and perfect match. Our time together began with the screening of the documentary, ***I am a Innocent Man: The Ed Johnson Story***. Then two members of the committee, Dollie Hamilton and Eleanor Cooper, one black and one white, told the story of their friendship and how the work on this project had impacted and strengthened their relationship.

Next, the Dean of Coventry Cathedral, John Witcombe, told the story of the bombing of Coventry in 1940 and the resulting decision to rebuild the Cathedral from the ruins, out of which grew the ministry of reconciliation that continues to the present. One of the ways in which the Cathedral promotes reconciliation today is through the table, a 32-foot long wooden table which seats 60 people, as a way to promote discussions and conversations amongst people as they break bread together.

Following this introduction of the two ministries, the group adjourned to the home of Robert and Terry Childers for dinner and fellowship. As the guests served themselves, one by one, folks ventured outside to the back porch deck where a long table beckoned them. Though it was rainy, cold and quite windy, the call of the table was too strong to resist. There the group, who hours before were strangers, saw friendships emerge and blossom. The conversations were lively and the laughter loud. The evening ended with hugs, thanksgivings and long goodbyes.

The next morning, the group gathered at Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church in the St. Elmo neighborhood



*Oliver Schuegraf & Erin Newton walk the Walnut Street Bridge*



*Back row L to R: Angela Shelley, Robert Osborne, Robert Childers  
Front row L to R: Mark Simmons, Marilyn Peterson, Erin Newton,  
Oliver Schuegraf, Ginny Mauser, Dean John Witcombe*

of Chattanooga. While the church was still under construction, Ed Johnson worked there as a stone mason and it was there where he was arrested. Mariann Martin and Eleanor Cooper of the Ed Johnson group spoke about their work on this project. Mariann, who was the group's liaison, spoke of a recent conversation she had with the sculptor who is working on the memorial for the project. He has said that as the work progresses, increasingly Ed has "been talking to me," showing how the remembrance of this heinous act can be transformative and redemptive. As the sculpture takes shape and "life," Ed is emerging with one foot on his noose and the other stepping forward with his arms outstretched. As I heard this, I could not help but think of Jesus emerging from the tomb, resurrected and alive.

We left Thankful Memorial and drove to the Walnut Street Bridge, the site of Ed Johnson's lynching. There we saw the site where the memorial will be and heard more about its design and layout. We then slowly, deliberately, and solemnly walked to the second span of the bridge to view and contemplate the place of Ed Johnson's death.

We found ourselves gathered in a circle, not by conscious intention, but I suspect, by grace. We spoke for a bit, quietly and reverently, and then, Dean Witcombe suggested we should pray the Cathedral's Litany of Reconciliation, which begins, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." This litany, based loosely on the seven deadly sins, is a confession of humanity's failings. After each petition, the response is "**Father, forgive.**" In leaving out "them" after "forgive," we are reminded of our need to receive forgiveness from God for ourselves as well as to ask it for others.

At the end of our time together, I saw more clearly the similarities and shared journey of Coventry Cathedral and the Ed Johnson Project. These are both powerful stories of death and resurrection. From the ruins of the bombed cathedral came the new cathedral, joined together, and reminding us that resurrection always follows death.

Hearing the Ed Johnson story while in the midst of the Community of the Cross of Nails meeting allowed me to hear that story differently. Ed Johnson's journey to the Walnut Street Bridge now seems like a sort of Stations of the Cross with the second span of the bridge as Golgotha, Calvary, and the Cross, with his final words reminiscent of Jesus's last words from the cross.

But, like the cross, the story doesn't end there. The memorial statute will tell the next chapter when it takes its place at the foot of the bridge. Ed will step forward, one foot on the noose which took his life, with arms outstretched, alive moving away from the bridge and out into the world. And we, those who know his story and the story of Christ's resurrection, are we not the women at the tomb whose task it is to go forth and tells others what we have seen?



*Celebrating the Eucharist  
Dean John Witcombe, Rev. Robert Childers,  
and Rev. Dr. Oliver Schuegraf*

Blessings, grace, and peace,  
Rev. Robert Childers  
CCN-NA Board President

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