

St. Thomas' – Spiritual Influences - God is Working His Purpose Out

By Pastor Faber F McMullen III, STE 1974

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I was born in Bellaire, Texas, in 1956. I am 67 years old as I write this. Next year will be the 50th anniversary of my graduation from St. Thomas' Episcopal School. I entered St. Thomas' halfway through the school year in the Spring of 1963. I graduated in May of 1974. I was reared in an evangelical non-denominational church, yet my parents chose to send me to an Episcopal School, as they were part of a movement away from public schools to a faith-based education for their children. I am so glad that they gave me this gift. It has touched so many facets of my life.

My elementary school years were enchanting and full of memories: standing with my class in 3rd grade proudly reciting the first chapter of Genesis to Mrs. Walters, learning to write in cursive, and sadly sitting in Miss Terry's 2nd-grade class hearing that President Kennedy had been shot. Probably the highlight of those years was having Hampton Mabry as my 5th-grade teacher. He was an affable, loving, single young man who was on his path to becoming an ordained Episcopal priest. He was a gentle and caring individual. He felt like a teacher, an older brother, and a father figure all sort of wrapped up in one. He was a blessing to me and to many.

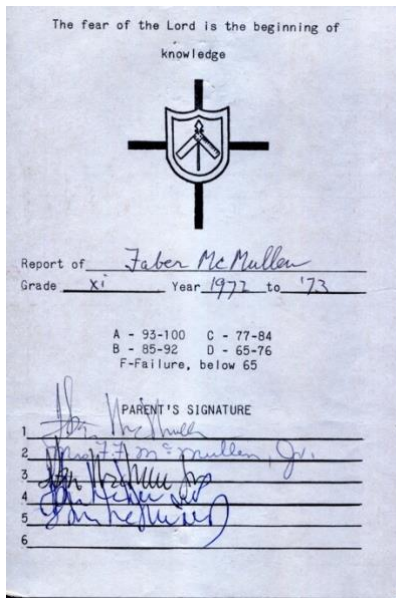


As fifth graders, we stood out at the flag pole on Fridays while the upper grade boys marched in formation with the bagpipe band leading the way in a "pass in review" before Mr. Walters, the headmaster, and Rev. T. Robert Ingram, the parish priest and founder of the school. The band and battalion marched their way to the flag pole where they all stopped. The band would then strike up and play some tunes as a ceremony of lowering the flag took place. I remember as a 5th grader hearing the bagpipes for the first time. My hair stood on end. I was covered with goose pimples. It was so loud, and it touched something deep inside of me. If ancestral memory exists, I must have experienced it that

day. I signed up for chanter lessons as soon as it was offered to learn how to play the bagpipes. This would become a wonderful outlet for me in the years to come, and it helped me to understand and appreciate the Gaelic roots of my family. In time, I became an excellent piper, and eventually I became conversational in the Irish Gaelic language. None of this ethnic and cultural richness would have even been known to me without my exposure to these things at St. Thomas'.



Junior high years were filled with soccer games, and my life centered around our teacher and coach, Mr. Henri Irvington (pictured to the left). He was a great guy and was sort of like an uncle to me. He'd give me rides home from school after practice, always stopping to buy himself a beer and get me a coke and a candy bar. He was my homeroom teacher several times during my years at St. Thomas'. Later in life, he helped me to become quite conversational in French. We developed a life-long friendship. Unbeknownst to me at the time, and probably to everyone else (perhaps except Mr. Ingram), Henri was in fact Jewish. His real name was Henri Israel. Later in life, I learned that his family had left Belgium, escaping from the Nazis prior to World War II. Henri first met Mr. Ingram while he was on a sales trip to Houston selling religious articles. He was living in Mexico where the Israel family had a company selling printing supplies. He also sold church articles that were being imported from family members still in Europe.



It was the selling of those goods that brought him to Houston and to St. Thomas' to sell his wares. He sold altar cloths, chalices, chasubles, etc. Henri later told me about an important incident that forged the foundation of our life-long friendship. He told me that one time when he was in the room, some of the boys began making anti-Semitic remarks about our one Jewish classmate. Henri remained quiet, but he told me that I rose up and challenged them for what they were saying. He later told me: "that was the day I fell in love with you, Faber McMullen." Well, I loved him as well and when he died I spoke at his funeral. His daughter, Judith, asked me to go say prayers over him at the funeral home. I went alone, found his body on a table in the back, and I covered it from head to toe with a Jewish prayer cloth. I said the

traditional Kaddish in Hebrew and thanked God that Henri had come to know Jesus as his Savior and Messiah during the last years of his life. He said this happened after I had given him a copy of the Message, a paraphrased version of the Bible. He said as he read the Bible, he just substituted "Henri," each time he read "Israel" in the text. In those last days, his faith became very real and personal to him.

My senior high school years are filled with memories of people that I loved and many with whom I had spent my childhood. The unique thing about the student body at St. Thomas' was that it was sort of like a huge family. My classmates and some of those in the grades above and below me were almost like distant family members or cousins. I saw them all day long in the hall as they went from class to class. I was on the soccer team with them or played in the band with them. And we saw each other every day in our chapel service. Each morning at about 8:10, the entire student body gathered in the Sanctuary for the Rite of Morning Prayer. This is a short service in the Episcopal Prayer Book that takes the congregation through responsive readings and prayers. By my high school years, I had heard many of these readings and probably said the Apostle's Creed over a thousand times. Each service included a reading from the Old and New Testaments, and on Fridays, Mr. Ingram would give some sort of devotional at the end of the service.

As mentioned, I was raised in an evangelical, non-denominational church environment. Evangelicals do a great job of communicating and teaching that "Jesus is your brother" and that "Jesus is a friend upon whom you can depend." They also do a great job in clearly presenting that salvation and an abundant Christian life are available to each and every person on the earth by faith alone in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8-9, John 3:16). The gospel can be distilled down to a few basics. Jesus died for your and my sins on the cross. He was buried, and He rose from the dead. If we believe in and trust the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross as payment for our own sins, we are saved. It is that simple (Romans 10:9-10). Paul communicates throughout his writings that Jesus + Nothing = Everything.



One of the great deficits of my evangelical upbringing was the predominant emphasis on the writings of Paul to the exclusion of much of the rest of the Bible. Please don't misunderstand me. The writings of Paul are absolutely essential to get the main theology of salvation by faith alone in Christ and the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God to every believer at the moment of salvation. But there was something lacking in my understanding of the whole tapestry of the Christian faith. I lacked an understanding of the authority, majesty, and mystery of the Godhead. St. Thomas' exposed me to the ancient creeds and rites of the Christian Faith. I might add, that I didn't always readily embrace it. I remember being put off by the Apostle's Creed because it mentioned believing in one "Holy Catholic Church." That was difficult for an evangelical mouth to utter. No one ever explained to me or taught me that this was not speaking of the Roman Church, but rather of the worldwide fellowship of believers in Jesus. That is the Holy Catholic (Universal) Church.

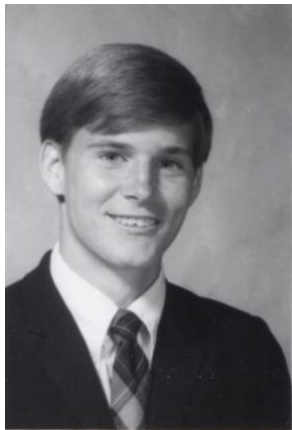
In the Sacred Studies classes, which we studied in elementary school, we learned in detail the oldest recorded history of mankind. Mr. Ingram had written all of these



stories of the lives and events of the people of the Bible. We memorized the entire first chapter of Genesis (the creation account) in Mrs. Walter's third-grade class (pictured on the left). As we made our way through the Sacred Studies classes throughout our elementary school years, we learned of the formation of the Nation of Israel. We learned of the hardships endured by the Jewish patriarchs as they obeyed God and sought His direction and will for

their lives. We learned of Israel's rebellion and consequent discipline. We in effect studied the Torah, the prophets, and the writings (all three comprise the Tanakh) for years. Many mistranslate Torah as "God's Law." Torah really means "God's Instruction." The stories of the first five books of the Bible (The Torah) give us life lessons in how to relate to God, others, and ourselves. I would have never gotten that exposure without St. Thomas' schooling. In junior high I just tolerated chapel, but near the end of 9th grade or the beginning of 10th grade, a spiritual change began to take place in my life.

During 10th grade, we carpooled with someone in our neighborhood. Consequently, I ended up at school about 7 am every morning. I decided to just sit in the sanctuary and think about things. My thinking led me to spend time in prayer. I began to ask God to show me that He was real. I was at a crossroads of deciding whether all of this "religious stuff" was nonsense or something that I needed to incorporate into my life forever. I began to look forward to getting to the chapel each day and I spent about 45 minutes reading over the lessons for the day in the Prayer Book. I had always tried to read the Bible, but I think that for the first time in my life, I began to let the Bible read me. The more I sought the Lord, the closer He felt and seemed to me. Something was stirring in my heart.



I don't remember exactly when it happened, but it seems like it was in late winter or early spring of 1972 (photo to the left is about that time). Mr. Walters got up to officiate the morning prayer service. I will always remember how striking he and Mr. Ingram looked to me in their priestly vestments. That was an oddity I was not used to seeing in church. As the service started one morning, I heard Mr. Walters read the "Shema Yisrael" as quoted by Jesus. I had heard it read a thousand times, but that morning IT READ ME. He said in a loud clear voice, *"Hear Oh Israel, the Lord thy God is One God, and Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy strength, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (See Matthew 22:37-40).*

I am not sure what happened, except that in one split moment, God revealed to me that I pretty much loved only myself. I realized that I didn't love God in a deep way. I did not love others that much. I realized that I just loved me. I was filled with something between dismay and conviction and I asked God to forgive me of this and change me. I began to weep, so I got up, left from the front where we sat, and I made my way out into a hallway to regain my composure. I have never been the same since that day. Would that have happened outside of the Ministry of St. Thomas'? I don't really know, but I know that God was working His purpose out in my life and it happened to me that day. I feel like I accepted Jesus as my Savior as a little boy, but in those quiet mornings alone in His presence, in the sanctuary at St. Thomas', I decided to offer my life as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, as outlined in Romans 12:1-2.



Fifty years have now come and gone. I have had several wonderful careers that were all made possible in part by the training and education I received at St. Thomas'. I know my years at St. Thomas' were a great financial strain on my parents (see checks to the left) and it involved sacrifice on the part of many dedicated teachers that poured themselves into me. My education at St. Thomas' was probably the greatest gift that my parents ever gave me other than life itself. I've now retired from my early career of the manufacture of drilling equipment, and I've retired from my second career as a small-town lawyer in Navasota, Texas. I entered that after we sold the drilling supply company.

I was happily living out my life on our ranch tending cattle and doing daily farm chores. I was teaching Wednesday nights at our home church, First Baptist Church of Navasota. I had earned a "Masters Degree of Theological Studies" from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary during 2014-2016. One day while working on a fence in the summer of 2016, one of my farm workers asked me to come speak at the little Baptist Church two miles from my home. Their pastor had left without much notice. The church had dwindled to around seven people. They were out of hope, and he wanted me to come preach just one Sunday. As I spoke to the group that Sunday, I felt that I was supposed to pastor these people. After a couple of weeks, they came and extended a call for me to pastor them, and I accepted.

I have led this congregation for seven years. God has increased us now to a congregation of 80-100. My years at St. Thomas' continue to have a spiritual influence on my life as a pastor. While trying to teach folks the majors of the faith, I have recited the Apostle's Creed, telling the congregation that this is what we should be willing to die for as believers. I have used incense in a recent sermon to demonstrate the lingering presence of the prayers of the saints in heaven. Time and again, I hear many of

the hymns in my mind that we sang at St. Thomas'. I have used them in my sermons. When preaching about the sainthood of every believer, much of my sermon notes came from the hymn "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God, Faithful and Brave and True" (Hymn 243 1940). Sometimes I sing to the congregation in English and Irish when we sing "Be Thou My Vision" around St. Patrick's Day. On those "Irish" days, I have also referenced the hymn "I Bind Unto Myself Today" played so magnificently by Mr. Mosely (Hymn 268). I know this in the Irish language as "St. Patrick's Breastplate." The Gospel of Jesus is what Patrick held onto as life itself. So, let me ask you now, "What are you hanging on to? In whom do you put your trust?" If you don't hold fast to Christ and Him alone, scripture says that you are without hope. I learned these hymns at St. Thomas'.

I am now teaching the Book of Revelation to the congregation at the Grove. There is one hymn that stands out above all the others as we make our way through this often-cryptic part of God's Word. People ask me, "What does this mean?" "Pastor, what is the right interpretation for what we've studied today?" "What is this book of the Bible trying to tell us?" I've been thinking about the BIG IDEA of the Book of Revelation, and I keep getting an echo in my head of a great familiar hymn. I hear childhood voices in the distance, singing in unison. I keep hearing Mr. Mosely majestically playing on the organ. I hear the girls start the anthem followed quickly by the boys singing the canon (the echo) in their most manly voices.

I am back there. It is somewhere between 1962 and 1974, and I can hear the hymn coming first from the back of the space where Quinn Hall used to stand. Then I listen more intently, and I hear it coming out of the present magnificent sanctuary that I saw built back where the old "pass in review" used to happen. Mr. Mosely seems to hover over the keyboard with his eyes closed, hearing every note, hearing every voice. It all seems surreal as though it were a dream, but it really did happen and it was beautiful. It was God working His purpose out in my life and in the life of many others. You might be asking now, "Pastor, what does this all mean?" "What are you trying to say?" I answer with Hymn 538, a hymn that I never would have known if I hadn't been blessed to go to St. Thomas'. God has a purpose and a plan for each of us while we're on the earth. The Bible tells us, "Seek Him and you will find Him" (Jeremiah 29:13). I urge you to do just that.

#### GOD IS WORKING HIS PURPOSE OUT – Hymn 538 – 1940 Episcopal Hymnbook

1 God is working his purpose out  
as year succeeds to year:  
God is working his purpose out,  
and the time is drawing near;  
nearer and nearer draws the time,  
the time that shall surely be,  
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea.

2 From utmost east to utmost west,  
where'er the church has gone,  
by the mouth of many messengers  
the call of God has come:  
Give ear to me, you continents;  
you isles, give ear to me,  
that the earth may be filled with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea.

3 March we forth in the strength of God,  
with the banner of Christ unfurled,  
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth  
may shine throughout the world:  
fight we the fight with sorrow and sin  
to set their captives free,  
that the earth may be filled with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea.

4 All we can do is done in vain  
unless God blesses the deed;  
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide  
till God gives life to the seed;  
yet nearer and nearer draws the time,  
the time that shall surely be,  
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God  
as the waters cover the sea.

Please feel to check out the teachings of Pastor Faber F McMullen III on the church's website at:

[www.uniongrovewhitehall.org](http://www.uniongrovewhitehall.org)

Union Grove Baptist Church of Whitehall is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at uniongrove362@gmail.com or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Neese- Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.