A History of Mission and New Beginnings

Mission, Oregon

On Sabbath afternoon January 1, 2011, a group of 40 or more people gathered at the Mission campus of Blue Mt. Valley Mission Native American Adventist Church to celebrate “New Beginnings.” The purpose of this service was to celebrate the merger of the Blue Mt. Valley Church in Athena and the Mission Native American Church in Mission, as well as to highlight the fact that the work that began there more than 30 years ago with Verna and Lee Clay is now being renewed.

Elder Monte Church, NPUC Director of Native Ministries, was our special guest who reminded us that the Mission Church and School are held in high regard in this community. Janet Gilliland, daughter of co-founder Verna Clay, was also present and shared some of the history of Mission from her perspective. The Hendrickson family presented a power point slide show featuring students, teachers, and events at Mission.

In the late 1970s Verna and Lee Clay members of the newly established Blue Mountain Valley Church in Athena Oregon, purchased a home and property on this Umatilla Indian Reservation in Mission some 25 miles away from where they lived at the time in Milton Freewater. They did so because of a strong conviction that the Lord had called them to live among the tribes that they had been ministering to for several years. Verna had strongly sensed God’s call in the wake of the tragic death of Mara, a 16 year old Native American who had been placed in her home as a foster child. After Mara’s tragic and untimely death, Verna had in essence made a covenant with the Lord to “do something to help Native American children” since there were others at risk of having a similar fate.

For about three years starting in 1975 Verna and Lee along with members from some of the local churches that they had recruited, travelled to Mission to conduct outreach in the Grange Hall there. They were not satisfied with just a craft program and story for the Native American children. They believed God wanted more and they began to dream of purchasing a home on reservation land with some acreage that could be donated to the upper Columbia Conference. They envisioned that on that donated land would be a building, a center for outreach and worship for the Indian population.

In 1978 that dream became a reality. Through a miraculous set of circumstances God provided this property directly across from the Grange Hall where they were then holding the weekly Story Hour! This reservation real estate included a home and some acreage that had been separated from the rest of the property. Verna and Lee placed their home in Stateline up for sale and moved onto their newly purchased home adjacent to the property that is now Mission Indian Adventist School and Church, in November of 1978.

The Clays then donated 1.5 acres of their property to UCC for a church and school. With the help of volunteer local contractors, Pastor Darrell Perry of the Blue Mt. Valley Church made the necessary arrangements for the building project which would consist of a building with classrooms and a chapel. At 3 p.m. on a September day in 1979, 55 persons attended the groundbreaking ceremony.

Over the following weeks students from Walla Walla Valley Academy, Walla Walla College, and members from the churches in the Walla Walla Valley and the Pendleton area came to help prepare the site and foundation for a group of Maranatha volunteers who would come on October 21 to begin construction of the building. Volunteers from all
over the area and dozens from Maranatha Flights International assembled together on October 21 to carry out Verna and Lee’s dream. The Clay home, just a stone’s throw from the new building site served as the hub of activity especially when it came to making the meals for the workers. Folks came together in a big way providing food and help.

On the first Sabbath of November in 1979 the first worship service was held in this building attended by members and the Maranatha group who had come to help with the project. Less than one year later, on October 25, 1980, the attractive Indian Adventist Center in Mission was dedicated completely free of debt. Members formed a small church company on that same day. The Church record indicates that the following individuals were charter members. Lee and Verna Clay, Kenneth and Juanita Cripe, Tom and June Hill, Dick and Hazel Lane, Claude, Elaine and Raymond Truesdale, Hal and Phyllis Larson, Roscoa Heerley, Steve and Carmen McWilliams, Julia Overstreet, Jake Wagner, Norman and Wilma Webb.

The total cost of this building was $40,173.47 and it was dedicated as a multi-purpose building for fellowship and service to the people of the reservation and their children. It seems that the vision of Lee and Verna Clay helped enlarge the awareness of the North American Division to the need to initiate or expand work in North America to the native populations.

The very next year (in June 1981) the first Native Camp meeting was held under cotton woods. In 1982 the Mission School opened its doors with an enrollment of 10. Fred and Betty Barlow were the first teachers. Harry Bagley came to teach when Fred was no longer able to do so. By 1984 the Mission school would grow to as many as 25 students. That year two students were turned away for lack of space. Betty served the Mission School for 13 years. Jim and Jo Ann Rasco came in 1995 followed by Joyce Wallen, Sandra Burrows, Margaret Goode, Bob Marcus and Mike Brown. In addition to the teachers the school was supported by many volunteers from the local community such as Debbie Shippentower, Glen Wister, Beryl Wagner, Hal Larsen and a host of others.

The Mission School and its students are deeply indebted to the many generous donors who gave so much over the years to keep this school operating. The Mission Church which would meet for worship and the children’s story hour each Sabbath would average around 30-40 members. In 2008 the school was lacking in enrollment and facing financial challenges suspended its operations. Attendance at weekly services had dwindled to a handful. With so few, it had become increasingly difficult to maintain the facility and outreach to the community.

In the summer of 2009 after much prayer, dialogue began to take place about a possible way to bring revival to the work at Mission. The proposal was made, “why not merge the Mission congregation with that of Blue Mt. Valley?” Perhaps together, we would develop a strong work serving the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation once again. After all, the dream began with the Blue Mt. congregation. All the entities involved in that discussion voted to proceed with a merger and on January 1, 2010 it became official. The Mission Native American Adventist Church and the Blue Mountain Valley Adventist Church became the Blue Mt. Valley-Mission Native American Adventist Church.

A Mission Planning Team has been established by the newly formed congregation that has been charged, in conjunction with the church board, with the responsibility of planning ways to help grow the ministry at Mission and ways to meet the needs of this community. In recent months the well and pump has been repaired, a well house to winterize the controls has been constructed, some needed repairs have taken place in the bath house, and renovations such as repainting and rearranging have taken place in this building. In addition to renovations to the physical plant there is an effort to reach out to the community with the Good News. By God’s grace several baby showers were given to some former students, a Vacation Bible School was held in August and monthly outreach called “Walk Thru the Book” has been established. This outreach is a time for stories, crafts, games, and music.

Our desire is to see a vibrant congregation who will once again worship here regularly as well as a school operating where Jesus Christ can be lifted up and boys and girls from this community can come to know the transforming power of Jesus Christ in their lives. Please join us in praying that God will raise up workers for the outreach, prayer
supporters, community supporters, and financial backers, and that the spirit manifested by Verna and Lee Clay and
the love they had for the people of this community will be stronger than ever.
Submitted by Pastor Matt Lombard
—by Pastor Matt Lombard, Blue Mt. Valley-Mission Native American Adventist Church.

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