

Lessons from a Crooked Tree

By Larry McGuire, president of seventy

Each school day, I try to walk with our daughter toward her bus stop. She prefers that I not walk too closely, and that I wait a safe distance away once she arrives at the designated stop.

At least 20 other students wait at this stop with only a few parents nearby, all watching. Usually, I stand at the edge of a park area so I can watch but not be intrusive. I often listen to a devotion or some music as part of preparing for my day. One day as I was waiting in my spot, listening to a devotion, I looked at a tree that has bothered me. I finally understood why.

Our neighborhood is well maintained. The green space is similar throughout the development—wide areas with green grass and a ring of trees on the edges. Living in the metro area of Phoenix, Arizona, means we live in a desert area. Much money is spent on the appearance of lifelike green grass, a variety of cactus, and trees. However, in this one area stands a crooked tree. It seems out of place.

Why does it need to stay and not fit in?

It is bent from events that I wasn't around to experience; weather, children playing on it when it was tender, a multitude of reasons. Its roots aren't fully covered, but it continues to show life through its leaves. And though it doesn't stand as straight as trees that probably were planted at the same time, it remains.

I wonder if that's what I experience with my soul? What if that's what our movement experiences as we continue to wrestle with our journey with God?

There are times when I'm sure of my faith and the journey with God. There are moments when our movement is well-grounded and stands firm in the communities where we have a presence. However, I also know there are days when my roots are not as firm. I bend. I do all I can to hold on, but doubts, struggles, questions, life wear on me, and I am not as straight as others.

Maybe our communities of faith were sturdy and provided shelter to those seeking a spiritual home. We were living our faith as it had been handed to us. But as neighborhoods changed, as those seeking a spiritual home began to ask different questions, as faithful disciples passed on, we found ourselves staggering to hold on in some neighborhoods where we once stood firm.

As I watched for the bus to arrive, I was captured by the tree that leans but remains. It has had to adapt to new way of being present in that green space. It continues to produce life in the form of leaves. Birds continue to gather on the branches. Children are drawn to its shape because they can reach the sturdy branches to swing or hang from in joy. It has a purpose even as it has a different shape.

Maybe that tree can teach me, teach us, too.

What I envisioned for my life and my career is different from those days when, as I child, I would play on trees on the farm or during times of study in college. I'm grateful for the ways I have found sturdy roots in relationships and opportunities to be shaped as I've experienced cultures different from mine. I've been stretched to expand my understanding of God and the questions that have led me to a faith that looks different than that of my youth. There are times of leaning and holding on, but also times of cultivating soil for the roots to go deeper.

In some ways, I suppose that's true for our movement, too. There are some things we expected to happen as we faithfully responded to God's presence in the world. But people and places where Community of Christ once thrived have dwindled to the point where we might no longer have a presence. However, in other communities and neighborhoods all over the world, Community of Christ has taken root, and the ministry of Christ is expressed in ways we never would have imagined.

As we move into the future, the most essential elements of our faith—hospitality, Worth of All Persons, Blessings of Community as expressions of God's love—will be expressed in places and people we don't yet know.

The tree bends but remains. Continued blessings to you that all shall be well.

