



January 22, 2008

Dear Friends,

The 2007 fires were rated the year's number 1 Montana news story. This picture was taken last summer by a friend. His ranch is by the Boulder River – the river that flows by the community of Big Timber, Montana. Imagine the devastation, heat and smoke.



Tom Tidwell, the regional director for our area of the National Forest, came to Hometown Helena last summer. He told us that they stop 97% of forest fires. Still, the 3% of fires that were not stopped in his region had consumed, at that time, over 700,000 acres (about the size of Rhode Island).

But, even after he spoke, the fires kept coming. The Meriwether fire – just north of Helena, near the Sleeping Giant (the logo for these updates) - started with a lightning strike that smoldered underground for days and then burst into flame – burning over again the area that the Mann Gulch fire of 1949 burned. The Mann Gulch fire also started when lightning struck the south side Mann Gulch, near the 'Gates of the Mountains', an area named by Lewis and Clark. That 1949 wildfire in the Helena National Forest spread

out of control and ultimately claimed the lives of 13 firefighters – one of the worst losses of life US fire fighters have experienced.

Thank God, the 2007 Meriwether fire did not claim the lives of any firefighters. However, it burned about 50,000 acres. And, of course, it made breathing in Helena difficult for weeks – as did second hand smoke from Idaho and other parts of Montana.



**A huge smoke cloud from the Meriwether Fire, 2007 (photo taken from Helena).**

The 2007 fire season was longer and much more expensive than normal. Montana had 1,763 fires this past summer that burned about 740,000 acres. For the first time in years, the cost surpassed \$100 million. The Legislature convened in a special session in September to pay the bills. If fires continue year after year, and the norm has been continually rising the past few years, what will happen to Big Sky country?

So the fires are not merely an interesting news story from the past. They are a current prayer need. When a few of us gathered for worship on 1/13/08 we prayed:

1. For those who oversee these forests – as they seek strategies to mitigate fires - to care for the land and manage its resources.
2. For elected and agency leadership – as they appropriate and manage personnel and tax funds.
3. Since the larger fires have been fueled by continuing drought and growing insect populations (like the pine beetle), we also prayed for:
  - a. A greater snow pack. More snow moisture in the winter helps – spring rains often don't. Thank God, we had a good snow (@ 9 inches) this week.
  - b. Colder temperatures. Interior tree temperatures between minus 25 and minus 35 Fahrenheit are needed to kill mountain pine beetles.

We love Montana and want you to join us in praying for this state. Does praying for more snow and really cold temperatures sound attractive to Southerners (many who read this update!)? I doubt it. But, that's what we need if Montana, as we know it, is to thrive. If you pray, please do pray for snow and cold.

What does this have to do with planting a church in Helena?

As Christians, we are to love our neighbors – our communities – our cities – our world and to point them to Christ. Praying about fire is one way to do that. For example, if the trees in the watershed for Helena's waters supply burned, it would take millions of dollars to clean the water for our city's use.

Consider Ps. 69:33 *“The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people. 34 Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and all that move in them, 35 for God will save Zion and **rebuild** (bana) the cities of Judah. Then people will settle there and possess it; 36 the children of his servants will inherit it, and those who love his name will dwell there.”* That is a beautiful picture.

The word “rebuild” in the Hebrew (*bana*) is used 376 times in the Old Testament. That’s a lot! It is used when God “built” Eve for Adam from his rib (Gen 2:22), and it is used to describe building growing families (Gen 16:2). But, *bana* is most often used for the construction of houses, cities, towers, and altars. **Cities are the most frequent object of *bana*.**

A man who grew up in the midst of brokenness of war torn Croatia, Miroslav Volf, has hope – a hope we share. He wrote:

*There is a remarkable image in the closing pages of Scripture that has become a touchstone for the way my colleagues and I think about faith and culture. Amid its descriptions of the New Jerusalem, Revelation includes "the tree of life, bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the **healing of the nations**" (Rev. 22:2). The tree holds out hope that **whole cultures** will be healed and mended, becoming places where people can flourish. And it sets an agenda for faith as a way of life that contributes to that flourishing, in anticipation, here and now.*

*Prizing power, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche derided Christianity for its "active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak." But we must reflect on how followers of Christ can exemplify "a counterculture for the common good." **The Christian pursuit of the common good must be church-based without being church-centered.** We need to build and strengthen mature communities of vision and character who celebrate faith as a way of life as they gather before God for worship and who, sent by God, live it out as they scatter to pursue various tasks in the world. **We work for the common good—because we believe in the common grace of the one God***  
([http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2006/11/the\\_churchs\\_great\\_malfunctions.html](http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2006/11/the_churchs_great_malfunctions.html) ).

When we read the Bible, we become aware of more than common grace and the common good. We become aware of a spiritual dimension to life. Jesus – by way of similes, metaphors, and allegories – spoke about this invasion of God into a broken world as the kingdom of God. Jesus refers to that kingdom more 100 times in the four Gospels. He only uses the word “church” in two passages. Can we get the big picture?

We want the church to carry this message of hope through Jesus. We want to focus on the gospel – the good news that Jesus on the cross willingly went through the fire of hell for anyone who trusts Him. In the Mann Gulch fire, foreman R. Wagner “Wag” Dodge, at 33 the oldest member of the group, lit a back fire and lay down in the burned-out area as the main fire skipped over or around him. Spiritually, Jesus deliberately lit a backfire that saved us – at the expense of His own life. We are amazed that the holy God can so love sinners like us.

### **If you pray, please pray for The Helena Project**

Please pray for these Helenans:

- Thanks for praying that God would provide a new **accountant**. Her name is Cindy. A friend in NC had been taking care of this work. Now it is being transferred. Continue to pray for good communication.
- Before Christmas a **husband and wife** went to court. The wife sought an “order of protection” against her husband. It was granted. They both requested and the judge granted that I be the intermediary for their communication. This has been a significant investment for all of us. Pray for them as they work toward reconciliation.

- Pray for a **Native American** who had come to some of our gatherings last summer, called me in December. After a year of sobriety, he had fallen again into drunkenness. Pray for his sobriety.
- I had asked you to pray for **Dan**, a neighbor who is suffering from a rare form of blood cancer. This week he was delighted to learn that he does not need to start a new round of chemo-therapy. He continues to ask for your prayers.

Please pray for the gatherings we have.

- It was an honor for me to be asked to lead the **caroling for our Rodney Street** neighborhood. A local musician, David Casey, brought his accordion as well as some friends and family. We were blessed by crisp but not frigid weather. About 40 of us caroled at a nearby nursing home as well as homes of our neighbors.
- The last Friday of November and December, we welcomed folks into our home for “**Soup’s On.**” We plan more in the coming months.
- Every other Wednesday evening, Via and I meet in our home with **5 young couples** to discuss “**Shepherding a Child’s Heart.**” On alternate Wednesdays, we’ve offered to watch their children. Thank you for praying for that gathering. We are benefiting from our time together. Especially pray for God’s blessing on these young couples as they parent their children.
- We have started meeting with a few people for **monthly worship** – including communion - in the evening. Our first gathering was 1/13/08. We plan to meet again at 5:30 PM on 2/10. Please pray for this gathering.
- Two years ago, I wrote: *Pray for our trip to Orlando for the “big” church planting seminar 1/30 – 2/3. Pray that we will learn much – make new friends – and renew old friendships.* Via and I both went that time and learned a lot. This time, I will go after presbytery – returning 2/2. Pray that God will use this time well – giving us direction, which ideas to pursue next, when to actually begin.

### **If you pray, please pray for Rocky Mountain Presbytery (RMP)**

This next year, we anticipate another established church, **Faith Covenant** (now an Orthodox Presbyterian Church) from Kalispell, Montana, will join the PCA. The pastor, **Lloyd Pierson**, will be examined this presbytery. Please pray for him. The local church officers will be examined by a commission of presbytery at a later time. Will we have our own presbytery in Montana someday? Please pray.

Please pray for **Christian Cryder** and **Ryan Sutherland**, our two PCA church planters in Missoula, Montana. A reporter for the main newspaper in Missoula got to know them and then followed them around for a couple of weeks before writing a front page story about what they are doing. If you would like to read the article and Christian’s response to it, see the attachment to this update on our website.

In March the pastors of the PCA churches in Montana will be **gathering in Helena**. Pray for a good place to meet – and for God to knit our hearts together as we represent His work in the PCA in Montana.

And pray for the men who are pursuing training for the ministry. Please continue to pray for my intern from last summer, **Josh Charrette**, his wife **Katie**, and their two sons: **Alex and Aiden**. They are expecting a little girl this spring. Josh is in the midst of his second year at Covenant Seminary. They will be staying in St. Louis instead of being in Billings this summer.

**Matt**, an associate pastor from a growing church in Helena, will be, at some future time, starting a daughter church. He requested that we meet regularly and we have begun. **Russ**, another church planter who primarily works with young men who are disenchanted with the “effeminate church,” has asked to meet with us too. We begin meeting today.

Josh has met a student at Covenant Seminary who is interested in working with Native Americans. Should he be an intern here? Please pray for God's direction. Do you have suggestions for others who might be an intern here?

I have been elected to be Moderator of Rocky Mountain Presbytery for 2008. I have also been asked to preach the sermon at the worship service 1/24/08. I will need your prayers.

**If you pray, please pray for our family:**

- **Jared, Rebekah , Jackson and Savannah** in Atlanta.
- **Jordan and Claire** in Raleigh, NC.
- **Rachel and Nathan** in Chapel Hill, NC
- **Zach and Micah** are working here in Helena.
- **Noah, Jesse and Isaac** are doing well in school.
- Pray that **Via and I** will love each other – our children – our neighbors and Helena – for Christ's sake.

Blessings,

Steve Bostrom  
507 5th Ave.  
Helena, MT 59601  
406-558-4342 (home)  
406-461-8529 (cell)  
[www.HeartforHelena.org](http://www.HeartforHelena.org)



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