

# An Invitation to Shalom

## Opening Address, Mundelein 2015

Bobby Gross

### Intro

The shalom of the Lord be with you all. [...and also with you.]

**Shalom.** What a rich and powerful and beautiful idea—no, more than an idea or concept: what a rich and powerful and beautiful... thing, a reality that we can experience.

Our pre-conference assignment has provided us delicious appetizers before even arriving at the banquet table of this gathering:

- Shalom refers to a profound human flourishing which combines harmony and delight and well-being ...thus encompassing community and art and justice and worship. (Wolterstorff)
- Shalom is an enduring Sabbath of joy and well-being. (Brueggemann)
- Nothing is more important in peacemaking than that it flow from a deep and undeniable experience of love....Prayer is the way to that experience of love. (Nouwen)

Since January, I have been praying with a quiet but eager expectation that this week we would have a palpable experience of shalom together. Thank you, worship team, for ushering us in.

### Steve Hayner

I experienced shalom in an unanticipated way at the end of January. On the last Wednesday of that month, about noon, I received a call from Sharol Hayner telling me that she expected Steve (her husband, my friend) to die that day and that Charlene and I should come. (Char and I had just returned from 10 days out of the country and were unaware that Steve had taken a downward turn.).

Most of you know who Steve Hayner was, but for those who don't, let me briefly say. After earning his PhD and working with students first in the church and then as a VP for Student Affairs at SPU, Steve became president of InterVarsity, serving for 13

years, from 1988 to 2002. He blessed the beginning of our grad student ministry. After InterVarsity, he moved to Decatur (I moved there a month after him and we lived two blocks apart) where he taught evangelism at Columbia Theological Seminary and then six years ago became president. Last April, the day after Easter, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, which he knew would be terminal. From that point, many people followed his Caring Bridge posts where we all learned something about how to live faithfully in the face of coming death (which is, of course, the condition of all of us, something we purposefully rehearse each year during Lent.)

So we went to the house and upstairs where he was lying quietly in bed. I leaned over and kissed him and said “I love you, Steve,” and he hooked his arms strongly around my neck and said “Thank you so much for being here.” We sat with him awhile. His cell phone beeped three times with text alerts, which he would gamely answer. “You know, Steve,” I said at one point, “you can’t take that with you.” “Yeah, I know,” he grudgingly replied. Then Charlene prayed a beautiful, spirit-filled prayer for him and we went downstairs to leave. But Sharol said, “Please stay.”

Leaving out the details, I’ll just say that we found ourselves members of an ad-hoc group of four couples, plus the gentle Hospice doctor, supporting Sharol and the three adult children. We basically camped out at the house over the next three days as Steve lay dying. I don’t know exactly how to describe the experience of that 72 hours. We were basically downstairs while family members were back and forth from Steve’s bedroom; we were available for supportive chores to be sure, but more importantly, we were there to listen and tell stories and cry and pray and laugh and reflect—a spiritual community in vigil.

Finally, on Saturday, when it became clear that Steve was near the end, the family gathered around his bed and began to sing hymns, read scriptures, and say prayers. The others of us sat in the stairwell just outside the bedroom, keeping a tearful vigil and singing the hymns with them until he died. Later, we all gathered for dinner and Sharol wanted us to reflect on what we had experienced over the past four days. It had been remarkable, something unexpectedly sacred. We tried to find the right words: *kairos time* in which the chronological clock seemed suspended ... *liminal space* as we stood at the threshold between this shadowy world and the realm of light and light.... But another apt word would be *shalom*—a heightened sense of love and life and community and gratitude and joy and hope, even in the face of impending death and loss.

Oh, the comforting presence of the Spirit.  
Oh, the inexplicable peace of Jesus.  
The deep shalom of God.

In the following weeks, I felt that my soul had been filled to the brim with a kind of goodness; I felt alive to the grace of God and open-hearted toward the people around me and grateful for each day. I was walking in shalom—an overflow from one life, Steve's, faithfully, fruitfully lived.

I am not expecting anything that dramatic for us this week, but I do long for us to taste shalom:

- As we encounter God together—in our multi-cultural worship, through the prophetic and pastoral voices of our speakers, in the provision for lament, in the quiet spaces provided for prayer and reflection, by the truth conveyed to us from the holy scriptures.
- As we engage with one another—listening with compassion, telling good stories, exchanging ideas, learning from our guests, encouraging and affirming one another, laughing and celebrating!
- As we enlarge our capacity to do our work, our good work among some 3,500 grad students and 1500 faculty in a key stage—like Steve Hayner forty years ago—to equip and motivate those we serve on campus to go deeper with Christ and flourish in their vocations and bear witness in their setting.

May the Lord envelope us in his shalom this week!

## **Context: Our Shared Mission**

The context for taking up this theme is our shared mission on campus.

Here is one way to express it: echoing Jeremiah, we seek the shalom of the campuses to which God has sent us—and has sent thousands of graduate students and faculty. We pray to the Lord on behalf of the university, for in its shalom—its well-being, renewal, its flourishing—we will find our own shalom and, in time, a greater shalom for the wider culture, here and around the world.

So we support all manner of grad students as they make their temporary home on campus. We don't want them to merely endure their time, which so often feels isolating and stressful, but to flourish and go on to become a transforming presence within their various professions.

To that end we start and strengthen witnessing communities on campus and come alongside them as visionary guides, structural architects and missional developers. In these welcoming, diverse communities, grad students find mutual support and resources for spiritual formation and encouragement to bear loving witness through word and service, and stimulation for the integration of faith, learning and practice.

And even more, we walk alongside faculty and administrators who have settled into the academy for the long haul. They make their homes in these settings with their families and friends and make their living as they teach their students and pursue their scholarship and shape their institutions. We want to strengthen these women and men for flourishing in their vocations and being a redeeming presence in the university—its people, its ideas, its structures.

God has called them to higher education—for the sake of shalom on campus and shalom in the culture. And God has called us to love them and to invest in them. Which is why we pray to the Father: May your shalom come on campus, even as it is in heaven. Amen.

Okay, I think most of you recognize that I have just rehearsed our GFM mission and ministry commitments and I've also alluded to our current five-year strategic plan titled: For Campus & Culture.

I am pleased to say, as we are finishing Year Two, that we are making good progress on the major goals under our five broad initiatives. Let me simply mention a few encouraging successes from this year.

Under ***Growth***:

- We have planted or are set to plant 11 new groups
- We have our first region (MW) with staff being trained and coached in new strategies for chapter growth—other regions set to start next year.
- We have added 5 new campus staff and five interns (just commissioned some)

Under ***Evangelism***:

- We now have an Evangelism Champion for each of our regions; next year they will begin functioning as a leadership team to sponsor various pilot projects and then discern the most promising strategies for fruitful outreach.

Under ***Discipleship***:

- To increase our expertise for serving the various constituencies on campus, we have taken steps to strengthen our focused ministries:

- FM—second planting cohort, scholars compass, NFO,
- ISM—our new director, Mike Gehrling, is working on a 3-year plan
- WAP—Karen piloted the Flourishing event; she's finishing her plan
- ME—We're set to do a training course for all GFM SDs in Sept: MLED
- PSM—As MBA director, Mark oversaw an outstanding BiB conference

Board member and professor Ken Elzinga to Alec Hill about Paul Chen, an MBA student he disciplined at UVA, now finishing a joint Stanford/Harvard program before going to Goldman Sachs: [Paul] called me after the Believers in Business and told me that it was the most memorable Christian experience he'd had. One part of the program left him in tears. I was, if I may use the term, "so proud" of IVCF.

Under ***Leadership:***

- Seven leadership positions were occupied for the first time this year: 5 ADs (Renee, Mike, Janna, Lisa, Scott), 1 new RC for FM (Hank), and a Dir for ISM (Michael)

Under ***Org Strength:***

- In partnership with our NAO colleagues, we have raised at least a half million toward our five-year goal of 1.2m.

So many reasons to rejoice....

## Shalom and Multi-ethnic Growth

But let me commend all of you for progress in another aspect of the SP: our aspiration to grow GFM as a multi-ethnic organization doing excellent ministry in light of the full range of ethnic and cultural diversity on campus.

Last year at this conference, we gave our collective attention to this important change process. How can we each stay on the path of growth in our ethnic awareness and cross-cultural dexterity? As we do this, our teams will become more hospitable to new staff joining us. And as our teams become more diverse, the capacity to serve skillfully on campus will increase for all of us. Thus, we will embrace the gospel of reconciliation for our own lives and become more effective ambassadors of that gospel to all peoples.

I'd love to hear how you worked on these goals this past year, the steps you have taken and the ways you have grown. Of course, we have seen a stark series of events

in our cities and on campuses that dramatize the need for justice, reconciliation, and healing in our country. Ferguson. Staten Island. Madison. Chapel Hill. Oklahoma U. UVA. Atlanta. These have been unsettling and challenging for all of us at some level; and for many of us, these awful events have generated great pain at the very spots of longstanding wounds and bruises.

Oh, the grievous weight that we even need to have a campaign to declare #black lives matter. Lord, have mercy.

How have you responded to these events and the controversies they have generated? Did any of you think of the Approaching Differences tool (from last year) when the Ferguson situation unfolded—whether you would approach the issues with openness or suspicion, whether you would red line (stand back, rationalize) or green line (engage, inquire). It helped me. Although, looking back, I regret that I did not choose to speak out sooner and more strongly.

I am proud of the ways many of you engaged—from the Veritas Forum at USC that Joe Thackwell helped plan to the series of programs Chermaine Kabugu organized with her UFM counterpart at Texas Southern to the pastoral care at the UNC Dental School provided by Hank Tarlton to the ESN post by Lauri Swann “God Was the First to Cry.” Last week, Scott Filkin told me about some of his actions this year.

Scott had an African American acquaintance back in Philly who had been mentored by his parents, Chaz Howard. Chaz is the Chaplain at U Penn. Even though Scott had only met him a couple of times, after Ferguson he initiated a phone conversation with Chaz because, as Scott said, “I needed more Black voices in my world.” Chaz says that the out-of-the-blue call met a great need and contributed to his healing.

Scott invited Chaz to be the speaker for the recent U Colorado chapter retreat, which proved profound for the fellowship. And Scott had also arranged for Chaz to meet on campus with about a dozen Black faculty. They responded to Chaz’s questions and pastoral presence with great appreciation, Christians and non-Christians alike. Scott said it was like no conversation he had ever been part of—to hear firsthand the surprising degrees of pain and alienation these faculty carry.

Scott: thank you brother for stepping out of your comfort zone to listen and engage and learn—and make space for your students to do the same.

I believe each of us has some story to tell about how we have learned or grown or acted in line with this vision. In fact, I am going to give you one minute right now to jot on one of the cards at your table one such experience from this past year.

[one minute to write]

[We'll later use these when we create a visual wall of shalom. This is to prompt us all to be exchanging our stories and ideas and questions as active learners this week. Fifteen of us have stories from the MESC three weeks ago.]

## **The Gift of Shalom**

Each year, the GFM Leadership Team identifies a “spiritual foundation” for our teamwork. This year, we pledged ourselves to receive and extend the peace/shalom of Jesus. Jay Sivits, our chaplain, gave each of us a small polished “peace” stone for our desks. And we chose four scriptures to dwell in: Jeremiah 29, John 14 (My peace I give to you), Colossians 3 (Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts), and finally Philippians 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.<sup>\*5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.<sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.<sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

As we gather this week as a missional community,  
as we renew our love for the university world and all the good that can happen there,  
as we recommit ourselves to be ambassadors with the message of reconciliation,  
as we hear the call to love our neighbors as ourselves, esp. those different from us,  
as we seek to increase the yeast of the kingdom in the loaf of higher education,  
be encouraged by these words from Paul:

- We always have reason to rejoice! So let's be joyful this week!
- We always have occasion to show gentleness. So let's love one another!
- God is always near to us. So let's turn to him in worship!
- We always have prayer as an antidote to anxiety. So let's place our needs and concerns and questions and dreams before God.
- And always we have God's shalom, which we can never fully understand, to guard our hearts and minds.

The shalom of the Lord be with you all. [...*and also with you*]

Amen.

**Closing Reflections**  
**Mundelein 2015**  
**Bobby Gross**

Thank you, Andy and team. We are ending our meetings as we began them—in the presence of God through worship and prayer. Henri Nouwen gently reminds us to make our home in God—as he makes his home in us: “...the peacemaker [is] one who has found a new home where peace resides and from which peace is brought into the world.” Shalom begins and ends with God.

My opening talk was “An Invitation to Shalom,” and my eager expectation was for us to have a palpable experience—to taste shalom as we encountered God together and engaged with one another and enlarged our capacity to do our good work.

Have you tasted it?

Let me afford a chance for a number of you to stand and say one sentence about how you have experienced shalom this week, by finishing this statement: “I tasted shalom when....” [3 minutes]

God has spoken to us here.

Here are a few things he has impressed on me.

Keep accepting God’s grace for yourself. Do not succumb to the idol of achievement, by comparing yourself with others and deriving your self-worth from your accomplishments. As Francis reminded us, we never complete the journey of grace. We are continually humbled and filled with gratitude by the ways God loves us, even though we are undeserving. This is what we contemplate during Lent.

It is because we are immersed in God’s sustaining love that we are able to look at and enter into the pain and brokenness in our world, whether on campus or in our society or around the world. I was speaking with Joe Whitchurch last night and he described how anguished he has felt lately over the suffering in the world, thinking especially of the Christians being killed by Islamic radicals in recent months. Dr. ABC taught us that as people of shalom, we do not turn away from the pain and brokenness around us.

And then I have been challenged anew that when I find myself in situations where shalom is sorely needed, I must both pray and act. To turn to the Lord, starting with



lament, lest I be overwhelmed by despair or paralyzed by questions or numbed by a sense of “what difference can I make.” And then to do something: make the phone call, go to the gathering, express empathy, call folks to pray, speak out, do something. I was encouraged by Francis’s example of obedience in response to God’s Spirit to do the simple things that over and over made a difference in the lives of friends as well as in cultural/structural realities.

Speaking of Francis, I thank God for his life.

I thank God for whoever spoke to him that night in the elevator when he was an undergraduate student—someone who evidently was always ready to speak about the reality of God when opportunity arose.

I thank God for Jeff Barneson and others who invested in him during the challenging days of his graduate study at Harvard, who planted the seeds of what it would mean to flourish in his vocation and be a redeeming influence as an academic.

I thank God for the faculty fellowship at Claremont with faithful colleagues like Dave Vosburg and campus ministers like Charles Barker who are there to walk alongside faculty to help them be the yeast of the kingdom in their settings.

Brothers and sisters—this is what we do! This is how we help bring shalom to the university. By loving and guiding and encouraging and equipping and challenging and praying for and mobilizing men and women like Francis. Thousands of them—and the number is growing.

I am so proud of you all. Thank you so much for your good work.

And now, we are about to enter Holy Week, so let me remind you of the one who said: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you—not as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid”; that one, Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh, chose that very night to let himself be arrested and tortured and humiliated and then crucified, that Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God... so that he could become our shalom.

The shalom of the Lord be with you.

[Final benediction from Numbers 6]