

Words of Remembrance: Mike Levi

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February 22, 2020

I thought this was going to be a difficult service to plan.

Mike's passing occurred so suddenly, and he meant so much to all of us, I thought it would take a particularly focused effort to bring all these pieces together, given the compressed timeframe and the emotional challenges involved.

But I was wrong about that. I went over to Mike and Pat's house at Highland Farms on Wednesday to start working on the service. Mark and Keith were already seated at the table, with a laptop open and several manila files on hand.

Keith opened one, withdrew a document and handed it to me. At the top it read something like:

What to do on the occasion of my death. By Mike Levi.

He had everything all planned out and all the relevant administrative and financial information documented: what to do about his internment, about his finances, about his will and estate.

But he also had the service planned out, including the texts and hymns he wanted read and sung here today.

I took one look at the document and chuckled. Because of course Mike would have everything all planned out and documented well in advance. I looked up and Pat and said the only thing there was to say, “For the last dozen years I’ve had a policy of basically doing everything Mike told me to do. So that’s what we’ll do now.”

And that’s what we have done. The hymns we are singing, the passages Keith read, the two verses of *How Great Thou Art*, which Alisa sang, all of them specifically requested by Mike.

Thanks to his prodigious organizational skills, it turns out that even in his passing Mike made my job easier. But he wasn’t just highly organized. Mike may have had the most powerful analytical mind of anyone I’ve ever known. One of the best minds, period, of anyone I’ve ever known.

On Monday, as I was sitting in the waiting room outside of the ICU at Mission, waiting for my turn to go in and see him, his daughter-in-law Patti (Keith’s wife) casually mentioned that, oh yes, Mike was a member of Mensa.

Just for fun I later Googled Mensa and was surprised to discover that, in fact, anyone can join -- provided their IQ is in the top two percent of the general population.

I’ve known Mike for more than ten years. How could I not have known that he was a member of the world’s most elite genius club? I wonder, Pat, if you perhaps did not mention this little tidbit about your husband to keep me from being intimidated.

Oh well. Nice try.

Actually, I was never intimidated by Mike. I was occasionally in awe of him but never intimidated. He was far too kind and gracious to make anyone feel intimidated. Which is a good thing. Because oh my gosh, I had no idea how deeply involved Mike -- and Pat too -- were going to get in the life of this church.

Mike began his long unbroken tenure of active service here as a member of our Social Outreach Committee, as we called it then. Of course it wasn't long before he worked his way up to be the chair of the committee.

From there he made the natural jump to serving on our Session, our main governing board. Once again it wasn't long before he rose to be the Clerk of the Session. He served two back-to-back tenures on Session for a total of six years, which is the limit of suffering we will allow anyone to endure.

Except even then Mike wasn't done serving in the critically important role as Clerk. Technically you don't have to be on Session to serve as Clerk.

So Mike graciously volunteered to continue drafting the agenda, preparing and distributing reports, taking minutes and sending those out. Now imagine that you're Mike Levi, and you're sitting in on these meetings with voice but no vote, and you'll appreciate what a sacrifice that was for him. But he did that simply because, at that time, we really needed him to do that.

While he was busily serving as our fill-in Clerk, he was also active on our budget and finance committee, as we called it then. And of course he eventually took the reins as the chair of that committee, too. And he was active in that role right up to the present day, as the chair of our Administration Ministry Team, as we call it now.

Are you sensing a pattern yet?

Remember that old Nike commercial when Michael Jordan was at the height of his popularity? The motto was simple: Be like Mike. Subtext: buy a pair of Nikes and you can fly. You can be a superstar.

So if you're wondering how you can get involved in the life and ministries of this church, the motto is simple: Be like Mike. Subtext: we need you in the game.

Let me give you a practical and measurable sense of the difference Mike made here, an idea of the scope of his contribution to this congregation.

In 2011 -- I believe that date, and all the dates that follow, is correct; but remembering specific dates is not my forte; they are the kind of specific details I could always count on Mike to keep straight--in 2011, as I was saying, Mike helped us navigate through a large renovation project, involving new restrooms and the installation of a new HVAC system here in the Chapel.

So the scale was significant, and the process was complicated, including the problem of how to pay for it all, and the plans were highly detailed. Not surprisingly, he was all over that. Like a bear in a honey factory.

Over the next few years we received not one but two substantial bequests and he helped us develop the plan for how best to invest and steward those monies, which lead to us establish five separate endowment funds -- one general fund, and four program-specific funds, that continue to support the ministries of this congregation.

In 2012, Mike helped draft the covenant agreement we signed with the college, a document that took us a year to write, and that helped clarify the somewhat complex and often ambiguous financial and administrative relationship between the church and the college.

In 2015, He helped draft our Ministry Plan -- another document that took us roughly a year to write and that has helped chart a course for this congregation to live into a bright, hopeful future.

As part of that plan, he helped us transition from our former committee-based model of ministry to a much more up-to-date model, centered around Ministry Teams and Action Teams--a process that also took about a year, if I recall correctly.

In 2019, he helped update the plan, working to develop several new congregational goals and initiatives to help us continue to live into a bright, hopeful future.

Earlier this year, he had also volunteered to serve on a new team that is working to develop a plan for stewarding a third substantial bequest, which we received just last month.

All of which is to say, that is a lot of work and a lot of meetings. I want to be clear: lots of other people were involved in all of this work, too, and they gave many hours of their time to it. But over this broad span of years, more than a decade, I'm fairly certain I spent more time together in a room with Mike Levi than I did with anyone other than my wife. And some weeks maybe even more time with him than with her. (Pat and Robyn, my sincere apologies!)

The difference of course is that I got paid to be in those rooms and do that work. Mike did it out of the generosity of his heart, out of his deep sense of loyalty to this church and his unwavering commitment to this community.

In fact, Mike was so present here and so active that sometimes it seemed there was no escaping or avoiding him . . . not that I would ever want to avoid him but sometimes absence makes the heart grow fonder, right?

Except sometimes I didn't have that choice. One day on my day off I went out for a bike ride. I had parked my car near Liberty Bikes on Hendersonville Road and rode up on the Parkway from there.

When I returned to my car I noticed on my little computer gizmo that I had ridden 19.8 miles. Well, I'll just loop around this building a couple of times and round that off to an even twenty, I thought to myself.

So I set off, rounded the corner behind Fresh Market and, you guessed it, I came almost literally nose to nose with Mike Levi. I'm not sure which one of us was the most startled. But whereas I was out having fun, riding my bike, Mike was picking up food from Fresh Market to fill the shelves at the food bank at SVCM.

Because that's just how he rolled. Born into a Jewish family in England in 1941--not a great time to be born in England--Mike steadily came to adopt the teachings of Jesus as his moral and ethical and spiritual foundation. Indeed, he eventually drafted his own Affirmation of Faith, his credo as it were, his own "I believe" statement, centered around his faith in the God of Abraham and his commitment to the teachings of Jesus.

So Mike's faith was deep and sincere. But, per the scripture Keith read--the foundation of his Christian practice was that we show our faith not by what say. We show it by what we do.

Which is why all the while Mike was doing all this work and all this ministry with and for this congregation, he was making a similar impact on the work and ministries of SVCM, as you heard from Cheryl.

So imagine, you spend your mornings collecting or distributing food for a local social service agency, then you go to your church and spend the afternoon working on budget issues, or reviewing renovation plans, or writing a covenant agreement, or a ministry plan.

That's a full day, right? Maybe for you and me. But for Mike when you're done changing the world by day, you evidently need something to do in the evenings. So he would go into his shop and turn out some of the most beautiful wooden bowls and vases you'll ever see. Might as well use your free time to hone your talents as a gallery level craftsman and artisan, right? I mean, who doesn't do that?

But maybe the most extraordinary part of this whole story is that Mike had basically done all of this once before, when he and Pat and the boys lived in Raleigh.

Mike was a top-tier leader at Pullen Memorial and probably spent as much time in the same room with Mahan and the committees there as he did here with me and with our committees. (And for the record, Pat was just as involved there as Mike was, and she's deeply involved here, too.)

And because of that, he made a similarly profound contribution to the life and ministries of that congregation.

While he was doing that, he also served on the board of Emmaus House: a transitional housing ministry for homeless men in Raleigh.

But that's not all. He was so active with Habitat for Humanity in Raleigh that there is a nice lane named after him in one of the Habitat developments there.

So that's how I know Mike. And that, I think, is largely how Cheryl and Mahan know Mike -- a top-tier leader, a man who was as kind as he was brilliant, as generous as he was loyal, as devoted as he was capable.

But when I asked Pat what she would like for me to say about Mike. It was not about his leadership, or his tireless service, or the dozens of ways he put his faith into action and turned his love for God and neighbor into practical acts of service.

She thought for just a quick moment, smiled and said, "He was the most perfect husband and a great father."

With this homage nearly complete, it's important to note that Mike was not without his faults.

For nearly the whole time I knew him, I had one overarching concern about him that I never worked up the nerve to ask: why did he always come to every meeting with his flannel shirt buttoned all the way up through the top button. *Come on man, loosen up just a little bit*, I always wanted to say. *It's just another budget meeting!*

But then I came to realize that this was a symbol of the man I came to know so well and admire so much. Unintentional perhaps but a symbol nevertheless. Because Mike Levi was the most buttoned-up man I've ever known. He had his act together, always, to an astonishing degree.

In light of the enormous contributions Mike made everywhere he went, in light of the measurable difference he made in the world, it is easy to make the case that Mike Levi was a great man. And that case should be made, because it's true. He was a great man.

But I think you can also say something even better about Mike: he was a fundamentally good man--loving, faithful and kind, utterly devoted to the welfare of his family and his community.

It was an extraordinary honor to serve as his pastor. But he was not just a member of my congregation. He was at times my teacher and over the years he became my friend.

Which leaves us with one last question. What are we going to do without him?

Well, here's a pro tip: you can buy the most expensive pair of Nike's available and they're not going to get the job done in this case.

Because, subtext: no one person can fill Mike Levi's shoes. So the simple truth is, we are all going to have to be like Mike.