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## Remember me

Clifford Reinhardt

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# “Remember me”

**Clifford Reinhardt**

*Pastor, Grace Lutheran Church,  
Burnaby, British Columbia*

## **Texts: Festival of All Saints**

One summer morning in 1979, we rolled into the yard of a Ukrainian Catholic church near the village of Macdowell, Saskatchewan. Like so many other country church yards in Saskatchewan, this one was bordered on three sides by caraganas, and fenced all around. But on this particular church yard, the caraganas were overgrown and the fence sagged with the weight of rotten posts. Tall grass grew up around the foundations of the church and throughout the yard.

No one met us at the gate.

We came with big diesel trucks, 20-ton hydraulic jacks, steel beams, other related equipment, and a crew of four. We were building movers. We had come to move the church.

This old church building had been bought by a Pentecostal congregation in Prince Albert. Although I wasn't informed of the details, I'm guessing that the Ukrainian Catholic congregation which had first built and used it had dwindled, like so many rural congregations, to the point where it existed only in name, and was now disposing of its assets.

It was a large building as country churches go—certainly larger than our building here at Grace in Burnaby. And in spite of the fact that it had not been used for some years and showed signs of neglect, it was still fairly sound. It still housed pews, some of which contained worship books printed in Ukrainian, with English-language leaflets tucked between the pages.

We sized up the job and got to work.

Now, building moving necessarily involves some destructive action—like pulling the front steps off the building. We rarely

toyed with niceties. We just loosened up the minimum number of nails, hooked on a big cable, and yanked it off with the winch truck. We had to smash a lot of concrete, too. What you needed for that was a 12-pound sledge hammer, all the muscle you could muster, and a good set of lungs.

Ordinarily, a job is a job, right? You're paid to do your work, so you go in, and you do it to the best of your ability. Well, personally, I felt kind of funny—swinging my sledge hammer and chipping away at concrete walls which dedicated hands had helped pour; brutalizing wooden steps and trim work which was simply in the way as far as we were concerned, but was in a sense a memorial to the volunteers who had cut and shaped and nailed and painted.

I couldn't shake this feeling that somehow we were violating the site—that we were undoing a work which had been ordained by no one less than God. On the other hand, it was just a building. We all know that the church is not buildings, but first and foremost, a *people*—a people saved, re-created, and called into mission by God. The church is the communion of saints.

And still I was troubled by a feeling that we were dismantling a trust, treading on memories, desecrating a holy ground.

Of course, the truth of the matter was that for all intents and purposes the congregation had simply died. The people of this particular communion of saints were gone, their church site unintended and forgotten. What we were dismantling wasn't intended to last forever, anyway. And yet when we trampled the site, pulled things apart, smashed concrete, cut electrical wires, and generally made ready in our rough way to lift the building off its foundations and move it to a new site—somehow, all that made me feel uneasy.

And so I was particularly disturbed when we discovered that we had parked our equipment in the church's cemetery. We hadn't realized it when we had pulled in. When we had driven up with our diesel engines snorting, we just rolled into a convenient open space. The long, unmown grass had obscured the few graves clustered to one side of the church building.

We made this discovery just as we were making ready to start jacking the building. We had gone back to the loads of steel beams and timbers and blocking, and suddenly noticed the small headstones, weather-worn and bereft of flowers.

Small headstones marking small rectangular plots in the vast sweep of the Saskatchewan prairie. Tall native grass slowly reclaiming the land which had been broken by the pioneering homesteaders. No flowers brought by surviving family members...perhaps because there were no families left. The graves of the saints, like the catacombs of ancient times, forlorn and forgotten.

Now, I'm not a superstitious person; graveyards don't disturb me. But something which I had come to learn to respect deeply when I moved out to Saskatchewan was the abiding contribution which Christ's saints had made to the church as well as to the land and its people.

They had so little. Their prospects were so meager while they lived and breathed. I believed that in death they ought at least to be permitted their small rectangles of land. At least this humble possession ought to be respected and safeguarded and remembered, even if there was no one left to bring flowers to these graves.

I asked the boss if we could take a little extra time and move the trucks and equipment. He agreed.

So we took the three-quarters-of-an-hour required to hook the trucks back up and then move the equipment to a different place on the site (we first kicked through the long grass to make sure that there were no more graves to disturb). Then we piled up some debris at the corners of the small graveyard so that we would know where it was and wouldn't drive over it again.

And then we went back to work. We jacked the church building off the old, weatherworn concrete, mounted it on steel beams, rolled it off its original foundation, loaded it onto axles and wheels and a Mack truck, and eventually drove it away.

The building was granted a new lease on life. It was going to be restored to good use by living, breathing Christians—not Ukrainian Catholics, now, but Pentecostal Christians with a style that Ukrainian Catholics would not likely understand—but Christians nevertheless.

The building enjoyed a luxury which was denied the saints who had first built it. They had but one life to live on this earth, before being reclaimed by that earth. They live on only in memories, their places perhaps marked by flowers placed by their survivors. And when there are no more survivors, the

saints lie forgotten. They can only await the resurrection of all the saints.

Because I was driving the winch truck that day, I was the last one to drive out of the old church yard. I stopped just outside the gate. Down the road ahead of me, I could see the church building slowly heading west on the country road, brown diesel exhaust billowing over its roof. I looked back at the church yard one last time. Its reason for being had been violated, first by death and now by us. The site had been rendered useless as far as its original purpose was concerned.

I looked at the little graveyard obscured by the tall grass and marked out only by our shabby piles of debris, its headstones undistinguished by flowers.

I looked one last time at things forgotten. And I shifted the truck into gear and drove away.

I can only trust that God in heaven will smile down upon God's saints dead and living and place upon their lives God's own marker: a single flower budding from the stem of Jesse, a rose always blooming...Jesus Christ.