

# This Old House

*Doug Davis*

Have you ever looked at your spiritual life like an old house? Although the place is comfortable and familiar, you realize you have become almost blind to what you live with and may need to renovate and update. This article will use the physical lessons of a house renovation to teach us the spiritual lessons of renewing our faith.

## Religious Background

I was raised in a Catholic family, but our family was not practicing, and I was Catholic by label only. In my early twenties, I went back to the Catholic church but found I no longer had any spiritual connection to it. So I began to search and found myself one day speaking to a co-worker, Mary. She invited Ingrid and me to read and study the Bible with her and her husband, Don – which we did. The words we were reading touched us, and we were so excited about what we were learning. We embraced our studies with them so much that we were baptized within six months of starting our studies. My spiritual house began to develop within the Christadelphian faith.

After studying the Bible, I became so zealous that I told those who did *not* believe the same as I did that they were wrong. To exemplify this, I had a direct, unforgiving approach that came to a head with my parents and siblings. They eventually avoided religious discussions at all costs and did not like talking to me for fear of another lecture. Fortunately, my family has forgiven me for being so harsh.

Don saw how fervent we were and, in his gentle way, used a metaphor to help soften our approach to others. He would say, “If you tear down the house in which someone lives, they will do everything they can to hold onto it. Instead, build a house next to theirs that they will *want* to live in.” This guidance helped me become more aware of how to speak about my faith with

others. It was an eye-opening experience to self-reflect on how I shared my faith with others and not be judgmental.

Over the next few decades, Ingrid and I raised our three children in our denomination. We attended Bible schools and various camps in Canada and the United States. I taught Sunday School, was Sunday School Superintendent, taught at Bible schools, was on arranging boards, did missionary work, exhorted, presided, and did many other things expected of a member. I *enjoyed* it.

However, over the years, I began seeing inconsistencies within our community with how we treated one another. I saw how we used the Bible to keep people down, oppressed – and away. I saw that we were erring on the side of being *right* rather than *loving*. I saw double standards for how divorced women were treated versus men, how women were not allowed to serve in their church to their full potential based on an interpretation of a few Bible verses.

I noticed that I took pride in our biblical understanding of what we call “The Truth” and I believed that all other Christian denominations were mistaken and had no chance of being in the kingdom. I saw that some members would get upset if someone used the wrong version of the Bible, didn’t wear a tie or head covering, used a hymn book other than the black or green one, or attended an ecclesia that some committee did not recognize. Also, I saw that we emphasized biblical knowledge but did not encourage a spiritual life – a life based on the fruit of the spirit, rather than trying to maintain traditional correctness.

I have found us to be more exclusionary than inclusionary, contrary to the message that Jesus preached. For he ate with sinners, healed the sick, welcomed the oppressed – and did so from a foundation of *love*. I was losing sight of Jesus and his love, mercy, and grace. I did not see that in my ecclesia and many brothers and sisters. The themes of love, grace, kindness, mercy, and joy were rarely addressed.

I found myself starting to withdraw. I began to take a back seat and do the bare minimum. I was going through the motions. I realized I needed a spiritual renovation or I would have to find something else that spoke to my soul.

## Physical Home Renovations

Coincidentally, in 2009, I took a sabbatical for three years. During that time, I began to renovate our 25-year-old house because certain things no longer worked with our growing family.

Rooms had become dated and needed to change. Ingrid and I looked at the various rooms and were surprised to see how many things we were blind to that we had lived with for so many years.

Some rooms were comfortable but made up of dated wallpaper, mouldings, and paint – all which we could quickly improve. Other rooms required a complete teardown and rebuild. Although we were comfortable in it, the more we looked at it with fresh eyes, the more we realized we needed to make changes for our family and the betterment of the house and our future. Looking back, I now see that I was spiritually experiencing the same things within myself, a realization that I needed to renovate my *spiritual* life. But I had difficulty knowing where to begin. So, I continued to go through the motions and live with my anemic spiritual life.

## Deciding to Renovate

Addressing the changes we must make in our homes can be challenging, just as changes to our spiritual lives can be challenging. We first must ask *why* and then we must be honest about whether the renovation is justified. If we agree that it *is* justified, then we must sit down and count the cost as to whether or not we have the *will* and *courage* to make that change – or whether we will continue living with it as it is, because it's not worth the price. One makes us grow, while the other maintains the status quo. Both are conscience decisions.

Once you start renovating, there is a sense of excitement about envisioning the changes, imagining how nice they will be, and doing something about it.

When the renovations begin, you can experience things you did not anticipate that can be motivating and challenging and may even cause you to reconsider your decision. Once you start to open up walls that have been unaddressed since their original construction, you are more than likely to encounter surprises. These discoveries may even set you back in your process, which, in reality, should be no surprise. You open a wall and realize the wiring and plumbing are no longer to code, and you have to remove it all, which means more time, money, and consideration. You may even contemplate just closing up the wall and ignoring it. But, for safety reasons, you cannot hide it, and it must be updated.

I underwent this type of experience with my spiritual renovation. When I began looking at the various traditions that I had accepted over the past forty years, I knew I could not allow them to be part of my renewal. However, once you realize this, you must do something about it, because you can no longer abide by outdated, century-old traditions.

Once the renovation is underway, where do you live? Who can help you? Fortunately, I have found several in our ecclesia and denomination who have undergone similar renovations. They gave me strength, insights, help, and a sense of belonging. It is like the account of Elijah, where there were seven thousand in Israel who had not bent the knee to Baal. Like Elijah, I am not alone, which gave me the strength and courage to continue my spiritual renovation. But, there are still times I ask myself if I belong here.

## Parable of the Dying Church

Let me share a parable that underscores why we must renovate – personally and denominationally. Envision a quaint old white clapboard church on a quiet street with a well-painted, glass-encased welcome sign in front that says *All Welcome*. It broadcasts a hopeful Bible verse that hasn't changed in the past several years. The church has been there for as long as the locals in the town can remember. The backyard has a cemetery displaying headstones of past members that date back to the 1860s. The congregation keeps the yard meticulously. Several congregants have members buried in the graveyard and can even trace their lineage to the oldest headstone, which they take great pride in sharing when the opportunity arises.

The founding members in the late 19th century formed because they felt a *change* was needed. They railed against the mainstream churches' oppression and teachings. They had fire and passion and passed that on to their children. Those children had children of their own, but each generation after them lost the passion and desire to embrace *change*. Each generation became more entrenched in their established traditions, which were revered almost as much as the Bible.

The current members became caretakers of those traditions and were wary of change that could upset the status quo. Today this congregation is much smaller and older, and its membership is a shadow of the church's glory days. The members of today's church find comfort in the familiarity the church and its traditions bring them. The children of these members no longer attend. They only come when they visit their parents or attend a funeral. When they attended years ago, these children shared ideas on how to renew their church. Unfortunately, the elders were unwilling to change, because it might have upset some older members. After time, for one reason or another, the children faded from the ranks.

The congregation – locked in tradition and paralyzed by fear of change – continued to slowly dwindle to the point they could no longer sustain the building. The now-empty clapboard building has a *For Sale* sign on the front lawn where the previous *All Welcome* sign once stood.

## Considering Moving

Unfortunately, there can come a time during our renovation when we face something that is not just moving walls, but is more severe and can impact our foundation. The price to fix this could be *way* outside our budget or current skill set. We may find ourselves at a crossroads in our experience. It is a serious question: *Is it worth going forward, or do we move to a new house altogether?*

We can appreciate how unsettling this choice can make us feel.

On the one hand, we have lived in the current house for decades and lovingly raised our family. We have close friends and neighbours we have cultivated and love. But buying another home may meet our current needs better and might introduce us to a new neighbourhood and community. But, would it, too, eventually require renovations and have a whole new set of problems we will have to address?

We can come to the same fork in the road in our spiritual house and think, *Maybe I need to move.*

## An Ecclesial Renovation

So now, fast forward to 2016 when Ingrid and I moved to the Picton ecclesia. Our church decided in 2020 to have *visioning* sessions to look critically at ourselves and ask what we wanted to look like as an ecclesia in the next three years. So, we spent two years looking critically at our Christadelphian traditions, such as where our denomination came from and why, our sisters' roles, our order of service, our music, our arranging board structure, and much more. As a group, we wanted to understand how our traditions came about. We prayed for the courage to not only ask *why* we do what we do, but then to *update* our practices to make them more relevant to the world we are in. We created a vision of the type of church we want for ourselves, our children, and our friends – one that would glorify Jesus.

These traditions were challenging to address because many were established over 150 years ago, handed down, and embraced from generation to generation. Many traditions had been elevated to a point where changing *anything* could either marginalize you within the community

or, at worst, disfellowship you. It was as if changing some of these would be the equivalent of challenging the nature of Jesus. Unfortunately, we also had some members leave and join other more traditional ecclesias that made them feel more comfortable. We knew going into this process that some people would have to follow their conscience and leave. But we also knew we had to either renovate or die a slow ecclesial death and never have a relevant and vibrant church.

Our ecclesial visioning sessions helped me to reflect on how I have been feeling about these ecclesial traditions over the years. It also gave me the courage to participate in changing these traditions. I permitted myself to look at my faith with a fresh perspective, knowing that I have a safe place to grow. And so, just as I renovated our physical house in 2009, I started to think about renovating my spiritual house similarly. This awakening made me realize I needed to rethink my views and question whether I wanted to belong to this faith community. It's like when you look at renovating your house; there can come a time when you ask, *Is it worth it, or should we just sell and invest in another one?*

I have approached this fork in the road where I didn't know if I wanted to stay with this denomination or look for another one. Sharing these thoughts with others helped me. I found many who have faced the same intersection in their spiritual journey. Some of us might be cruising, just going along, accepting the status quo, and going with the flow even though we are increasingly uneasy with the institution and framework. One day we wake up and realize something *has* to change. And when that happens, you require a renovation for your spiritual life, your well-being, and, most importantly, your relationship with Jesus.

*Not being fearful* about taking a serious and objective look at my spiritual house is *liberating*. Our ecclesia is a place that encourages and promotes critical thinking – and supports renewal. And it's an experience we should *all* have at *several* points in our walk. So, when we start to renovate, we must take stock of what needs to change and be realistic about the potential disruption to our lives and our spiritual community. You may relate to what I am saying if you have ever undergone this spiritual renovation. It can be a messy process at times but also illuminating.

## Limiting God

During my spiritual renewal, I discovered that I had enclosed and isolated God, so *He* was where *I* wanted Him to be and what *I* wanted Him to be – as opposed to *me* being where *He*

wanted *me* to be. We can lose sight of who God is. We can lose sight of His extraordinary power, greatness, authority, love, mercy, gentleness, kindness, and patience. I made God fit *my* spiritual house and I found that many churches in our denomination did the same – through the gravity we gave these revered traditions. These limitations have limited us from fully appreciating and revering His miraculous characteristics.

I love this verse from Chronicles:

*But will God dwell indeed with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house which I have built! (2Chr 6:18)*

Our teachings can sometimes be closed-minded in that we may look at that verse and see ancient Israel, but not apply it to how *we* try to contain God in our present lives and denomination. We have to make this personal. We have to hold up the mirror to see whether or not we have made a house that makes God in *our* image and holds Him within the walls *we* have built.

Renewing our faith breathes life into a far better relationship with God and Jesus – and with each other.

As you can see, my spiritual life has been – and still is – under renovation. I encourage you to look at *your* spiritual life with fresh eyes and ask, *Is my relationship with Jesus and God the best it can be? Can I do better? Does the current environment I am living in support questions and new thinking? Do I have the courage to change and renovate my spiritual life to re-engage with God and Jesus and to improve my relationships with them?*

Renovation and renewal is a healthy and enlightening process to go through. We should not allow fear to stop us from opening the surrounding walls. So, embrace it. Don't fear it. It's a *good* thing to do. If it renews our spiritual life, it can be nothing but positive. When we contemplate these things, we have to be courageous when taking on change, and we have got to be open and candid with ourselves. There should be no sacred cows in this process because, at the very least, it helps us reaffirm and strengthen the current relationship with our Master.

## Ongoing Renovations

Many of us have experienced aspects of the aging church in our journeys. I did come to a crossroads as to deciding whether or not I wanted to stay or leave. I decided to stay. But I had to renew my faith and renovate my spiritual surroundings.

First, I critically examined what should stay and what needs to go for me to thrive. Fortunately, I was discerning enough to separate the tradition-based worship and its spiritually anemic thinking from the critical teachings of Jesus. These teachings are the positive influences that enable the fruit of the spirit to grow within us. They bring a healthy and vibrant relationship with God, Jesus, and one another.

My renovations are ongoing, and I am sure they will continue. I pray that I will always maintain a spirit of renewal, that I will be courageous enough to keep asking *why*, and that I will not be afraid of the answers that return.

The other side to our spiritual renewal is finding others willing to share their spiritual renovations with us. I am grateful to have an understanding and patient spouse. And I have a loving ecclesia that encourages me to ask *why*. We support each other and have begun to tear down traditions and practices that hinder us from growing and strengthening one another. We are all on this journey and are growing, and I am so grateful for this. It is an individual journey, but we need those around us, and this interdependence is essential. It supports our growth and renewal.

Most importantly, I am thankful we have an understanding God that encourages renewal and welcomes change. He is not afraid of our renovations, therefore, nor should we be. We should look at how we can make these changes collectively in our lives. And this renewal is necessary when we realize that we have become complacent.

My talks over the past several years have more of a theme of showing love, grace, and mercy by showing the character of Christ in how we treat one another – and how we accept ourselves. Renovating my faith has been insightful and illuminating. It makes me think of Romans 12: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. (Rom 12:2)* That translation of renewal here also means to renovate your mind so that, by testing, you may discern God's will – what is good and acceptable and perfect.



I am so grateful to my ecclesia because we ventured to look at these traditions together and had the will and courage to ask *why* and initiate change as an ecclesia. It's interesting how easy it can be to see the changes we want *others* to make but be blind to the changes *we* need to make in ourselves or in our own church. It's like seeing the speck in someone else's eye but missing the log in your own eye.

The future is still unknown as to where this will lead. Still, I'm confident my spiritual house will be of better quality and reflect God and Christ *more*, that many are doing *similar* renovations, and that we're on this journey *together*. We're all at different stages, but we will get through this, and we will be better for it. If we face the fear head-on and do so with prayer, love, openness, courage, honesty, and consideration, we will be building something that will last for generations.

I will leave you with these words from Ephesians:

*But that is not the way you learn from Christ, assuming that you have heard about him, and were taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires. And to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God and true righteousness in holiness. (Eph 4:20-24)*