

The Ventnor Arrangement

As you read this story, keep in mind that, back then, overseas missionaries communicated mostly by international snail airmail and sometimes (in emergencies) by telephone or telegram. That was long before telex, fax, E-mail or Skype.

I had never heard of Ventnor, an Atlantic shore city in New Jersey, until I nearly died from a mumps relapse at age 32. The year was 1960.

As a representative of Slavic Missionary Service, based on the East Coast, I was spending considerable time in southern States, especially Florida.

It seemed good stewardship to move south. And our modest salary could go a lot further down there. An organization in St. Petersburg, would let us use one of their houses free of charge until we found an affordable place to rent.

The beginning of September, we notified our landlord that this would be our last month. But, just to be on the safe side, we prayed the Lord would stop us if the move was not part of his plan.

I have been Sovereignly stopped before and since, but never so drastically.

I could have handled and explained away the first time around with the mumps. But, the relapse was the convincer. (If you've had the mumps as an adult, you know how bad, how dangerous, it is. But have you had a mumps relapse?)

By comparison, the first time around is "a Sunday School picnic.") There was no mistaking the message: Forget Florida. We asked the landlord for a month's extension. A move was inevitable; we just didn't know when or where.

That's when someone told us about Houses of Fellowship (HOF) in Ventnor, a southern suburb of Atlantic City. HOF was a square city block of housing facilities where missionaries could stay, free of charge, for up to 12 months.

We were urged to apply. And we did. The application form asked when we wished to come to the compound. "November the first," we wrote naively.

By now it was the end of September. A little later, we found out there was at least a one-year wait.

Our application arrived at HOF on a Thursday afternoon. The day before, HOF received a letter of cancellation from a missionary family in Africa. So, we would be assigned their apartment. And, yes, we could come November 1.

The very next day (Friday), the people who were living in our future apartment and whose time was up the end of October, came to the HOF office in the morning and asked for an extension. Their teen-aged son was having emotional problems and they could not return to the mission field as planned. The director said she was sorry, but the apartment had been promised to us the day before. They would have to move out by the end of October. Needless to say, the missionaries were disappointed that they missed their opportunity by one day.

(As it turned out, they were able to rent a cottage across the street from HOF. The second week of October, Betty and I could wait no longer and made the two-hour drive from New Brunswick to Ventnor to "spy out the land." The director showed us around the beautiful facilities. We were also shown the outside of the house where we would be living in a couple of weeks. For some reason, I made a mental note of the street name and house number. (Zip codes didn't exist back then.)

That same afternoon, at HOF's monthly tea, we met some of the resident missionaries. The director told us the family that was moving out of "our" apartment the end of the month was looking for a small church to pastor for at least a year until their family problems were resolved. I felt compelled to make a mental note of the man's first and last name. (He and his family were out of town at the moment.)

A few days later, I received a circular letter from the president of the Evangelical Ministerial Association of Central Jersey. After scanning it, I was on the verge of throwing out the form letter but was checked. Among other items, he included the name and address of a small church (in Eastern Pennsylvania) that was looking for a pastor. After highlighting the church/pastor paragraph, I put the letter in a small, plain envelope, addressed it to the missionary whose name and address I recalled and, without giving my own name and address, mailed it to Ventnor. (I did mention it to Betty.)

Just before Christmas, Betty attended the monthly afternoon tea at the HOF clubhouse. (I was in meetings – in Florida.) Different missionaries were relating their latest experiences, sharing prayer requests and items of praise. When I returned, Betty told me about a man who gave the following testimony.

He, John, started out by saying that most of the people there knew how disappointed he and his wife were when they missed getting an extension of their stay in their HOF apartment because another missionary family beat them to it by one day. Most of the people there also knew the reason for their need to remain in the States indefinitely. The other missionaries had been praying about their finding a small church to pastor.

Well, John wanted to give them an update and also to say farewell. A few weeks ago, from an anonymous source, he received an address of a church in Eastern Pennsylvania. They followed up and would be moving next week to pastor this church! Any resentment he had toward the family that bumped them from the house was now gone. They realized, again, "...that in all things God works for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose." God had the right to resolve things for them in his own time, in his own way. True, the anonymous letter was still a mystery, but that was OK.

At the conclusion of the sharing time, Betty went over to John, introduced herself, and solved the mystery of the letter. He couldn't get over how the very people he had resented were the ones whom the Lord used to help resolve their greater need. *And Betty and I never forgot how important it is to move in God's will. It always involves and affects other people.* ◇◇◇