

Richard H. Bliese's formative moments

by [Richard H. Bliese](#)

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My mother, after having experienced the power of the charismatic renewal in the early 1970s, cornered my father, a faithful Lutheran pastor, with the following critique: "If Lutheran theology is so good, how did it miss the Holy Spirit?" He had no compelling reply, even after studying again his books from seminary. He later followed her and my brother into the "baptism of the Holy Spirit."

Later vacations

were dedicated to figuring out what had just happened to our family. What was the right parochial language to grasp this ecumenical phenomenon? Could our tradition adequately explain the experience or would we need our Pentecostal friends for answers?

While still in

high school my oldest brother, Karl, took the leap into the uncharted waters of spiritual renewal. At first, the rest of the family just watched from the shoreline. Karl would later go on to college and lead—as a Lutheran—two different campus groups: Inter-Varsity and the Baptist Student Union. Ecumenism was born into our family.

Karl

was given these opportunities because of his considerable gifts for leadership. The only thing slowing him down, from his premature birth on, was cerebral palsy. He would motivate large groups with his preaching; then they would pray for God to straighten his legs. I can't count how many groups laid hands on Karl as a spiritual project. "It's God's will," they confidently claimed. Their prayers for healing created disappointment, accusations and spiritual confusion in these groups

and, ultimately, in our family. Why doesn't the Great Physician act? The answers were never kind.

Karl's life, a spiritual roller coaster, has been extremely formational for our family. Key questions resonate again and again—questions about the relationship between renewal and tradition; healing and doubt; mission and failure; power and weakness; Mephibosheth and the pain in Paul's side.

These lessons have become particularly instructive for me now that I'm the president of a seminary. We educate missional leaders. We want these leaders to transform congregations. Karl's life has taught me critical lessons about the dynamics of this kind of transformative leadership; it is Spirit-filled, passionate about communicating the faith, driven by mission, adaptive in strategy and style and, ironically, not afraid of vulnerability and weakness. The lessons of 2 Cor. 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made known in weakness," a text my brother embodies, still call and challenge me.

Karl ministers today to a Lutheran congregation from a wheelchair. The congregation is small but thriving. The lessons about the Holy Spirit and mission continue.

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