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A Journal for Church of God Ministries

engage

IN THIS ISSUE

Pastoring Your Home Church

When Natural Disaster Strikes

The Most Common Factor in Declining Churches

Intercession

Little Is Much When God Is in It

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Learning From the Past

WITH THIS ISSUE of *Engage*, we inaugurate the *Pentecostal Minister* Flashback. We have reprinted an article from the former Church of God publication of the 1980s which had similar goals to reach pastors and ministry personnel.

In the 1980s, we had such publications as *Lighted Pathway*, *Evangel*, and *Pentecostal Minister*. There was no such thing as an “online” publication. Of course, today, that picture has changed dramatically. *Engage* is the outgrowth of *Pentecostal Minister* and is an online journal, while the *Evangel* is both printed and online.

Although the *Lighted Pathway* is no longer in print, the number of smaller, concise, and focused online publications is more numerous. From the general overseer’s office alone, there are monthly newsletters (*First Monday*) and video programs (*Faith Matters* and *ONE on ONE*). Websites contain the latest information and links to other helpful sites, all of which can be updated or

edited, literally in seconds, without the expense and time of reprinting.

I had a twinge of nostalgia run through me as I was thumbing through the pages of the spring 1981 issue of *Pentecostal Minister*, but it soon faded when I remembered what a glorious day of digital access we have today. ■

Engage journal is published in the interest of providing resources for Church of God pastors.

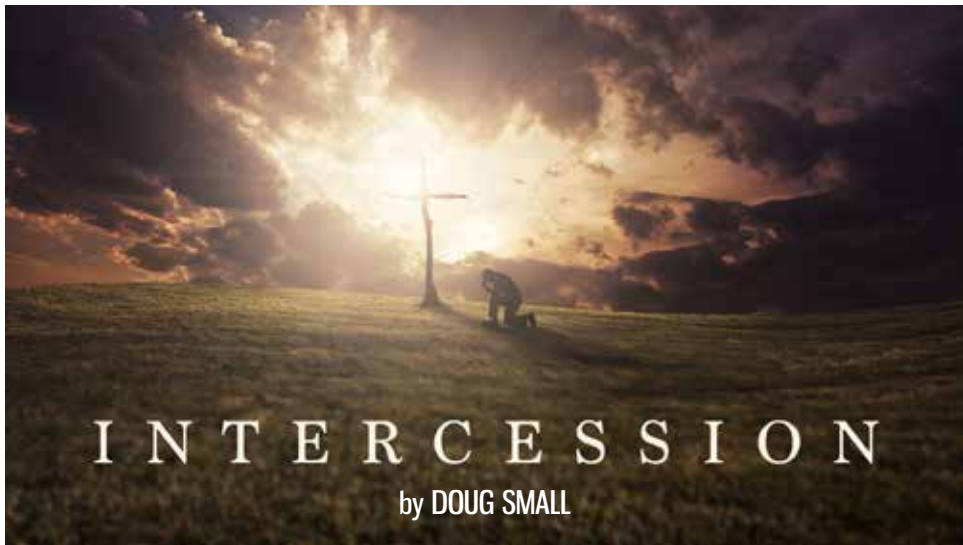
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INTERCESSION

by DOUG SMALL

“WANT A LITTLE HELP with my intercessors,” the pastor softly and cautiously remarked.

“I understand,” I responded, smiling. However, I knew the need was greater. It is always greater. What is needed is the transformation of the church into a *house of prayer for the nations*. The churches of the Holiness Movement wanted a little bit of the Spirit when God wanted to send the tsunami—the latter-day Pentecostal outpouring that spawned our own movement. The European church, pricked by the news of faraway places and people who had never heard the gospel, hesitated, as God raised up the likes of Livingston and Carey, and a veritable missionary army, launching the modern missionary movement. Some leaders conceded that a bit of change was needed, but Luther called for a complete reformation. The classical Protestants could

not understand Wesley’s call for intentional consecration and sanctification. God is ever moving onward, and the modern prayer movement is the edge of His work in the earth today. It is not a tweaking of prayer in the church He desires—He wants a praying church!

Intercession is always the wrong place to begin with a prayer ministry—it is the utility of prayer for another; it is the noble use of prayer; it is the necessary missional edge of prayer. But, it is not the heart of prayer, nor is petition. And so, much of our prayer energy is invested in these two places: (1) Petition, for our needs, and (2) Intercession, although rarely for the lost. These are *transactional* components of prayer. Good prayer is—at its heart—*worship*. It begins with God. It is satisfied only by His presence, though He never allows it to terminate there. Good prayer changes me, before it changes things

and others. Good prayer centers me in God's love, and makes me an agent of such love. Good prayer is over an open Bible, gazing into that mirror, and allowing the Holy Spirit to graciously change me. This is the part of prayer that is missing from our churches, from our people.

Only 5 percent of our families now pause for family devotions. We live from Sunday to Sunday off the energy of praise and the inspiration of preaching. In between, we are empty, unable to glow with His glory. We are too weak, at times, to fend off temptation. We are too tired to pray, but tired in more than our bodies, because we don't pray. We are trapped in a model of prayer that is inadequate. We are unable to embrace prayer for the pleasure of His presence. We see it as a necessary, toilsome duty. At its heart, prayer in its purest form is worship; and at its edge, it is mission. And, that is both the purpose of the church and the purpose of our lives, succinctly stated—to glorify God in a compelling and engaging manner and to invite the lost into the worship circle. This is the goal of a healthy prayer ministry.

How do we get from where we are to where we need to go? First, let's admit that we need more than a little additional prayer—the *central place of prayer* in both worship and mission must be addressed. Second, we need to *reengage the practice* of healthy prayer, Bible-based praying, and transformational prayer. Third, we need to find and *train* a prayer leadership team in our churches, and if we bias that toward the

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traditional view of intercession as warfare, we will set back our cause. The prayer leadership team must first be a learning team—one that unlearns, and relearns. A team is needed for all the areas of focus: Praying men and women, the restoration of the family altar, and a pervasive movement of prayer in the church—a movement anchored in a churchwide prayer meeting and proliferated through focused prayer groups that are healthy, identified, teamed, trained, affirmed, directed, and debriefed intercessors, as well as a strategic, systematic prayer evangelism plan and process that identifies a mission field near and far.

May I help your intercessors? When may I come?

Church of God Prayer Ministries offers Schools of Prayer, a Prayer Leader Continuing Education process; Prayer Trainer certification, prayer coaching, and more. Contact them for resources. www.praycog.org 704-938-9111. ■



by ERNIE
VARNER

Challenges and advantages of ministering where you are known

PASTORING YOUR HOME CHURCH

“GOOD DECISION, DAD!” Those were the words from my 8-year-old son when I gathered him and his sister together in our living room in Hixson, Tennessee, and told them we were moving to Lenoir City to pastor the Sixth Avenue Church of God. I had been at my first pastorate 37 months, and things were going well. Yet, my home church, the church where I was introduced to the

Pentecostal faith, was coming open. I asked the overseer to present my name, and I received the vote. That was 17 years ago.

First of all, to give some background to my story, I was born and reared in Lenoir City, Tennessee. I grew up at the Sixth Avenue Church of God. I left Lenoir City 17 years prior to coming back to pastor the Sixth Avenue church. During that time, I evangelized, pastored my first church, and

received a B.S. degree in pastoral studies from Lee University and a M.Div. from the Pentecostal Theological Seminary.

To get back to my son's words, there certainly have been times when I have wondered if it was a good decision. There are some unique challenges to pastoring your home church. Jesus said, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house" (Mark 6:4 NKJV). The Bible indicates that their unbelief was rooted in the fact that they knew Him. They knew His family, His brothers, His sisters, and they knew Him. They had seen Him grow up; they had even lived in that same city of Nazareth with Him. These are the reasons they were so astonished that so many works had been done in other places because of Him. I believe that pastoring your home church results in several challenges.

CHALLENGES

First and foremost, I would suggest that it is more difficult to establish yourself as a leader. As every seasoned pastor knows, it's not the appointment card from the state overseer that makes you the "pastor." That title has to be earned. I think the Jews were saying, we have known Him (Jesus) all of His life, and He is not special. Here was their logic: They said, first, "He's one of us." Second, "We're not much." Third, "He couldn't be much either." That's the way they reasoned it out. Regarding my story, I did not grow up with a stigma or a bad name; but at the same time, I was not rich,

famous, or a great athlete. I was common; I was one of them. Therefore, I think it is a challenge to rise as a leader, more so, if you are pastoring your home church, because you are one of them. They know you. They know your family. They have seen you grow up. The key to overcoming this is some "success" early on in your decision making. Fortunately, I experienced that early on at Sixth Avenue. We had good services; we experienced growth, both numerically and financially, and I was able to make some good staff hires.

I feel that another challenge is "commonality." Because you are one of them, because they did grow up with you or know you all your life, it is much easier for them to fail to respect the office you hold. They knew you as "Ernie," but now you are "pastor," not just in title, but in spiritual oversight, in administration, and in proclamation. There have been many times early in my ministry at Sixth Avenue when I had to sometimes remind individuals to respect the office I held even if they did not respect me. I can remember in the early years more than once, telling children of some of the parents with whom I went to school: "Please call me, 'Pastor.' Your parents call me 'Ernie,' because they have known me all my life. But, you need to call me pastor because of the office I hold."

Another challenge for many who pastor their home church is family. Several of my colleagues who pastor their home church have shared about the difficulty of separating the role of family member from that

of pastor. However, even though I pastor some members of my family, who are not a challenge for me, my family was not in leadership 17 years ago, and they are not today. They are faithful, but very low-keyed in regard to the direction and leadership of the church.

The fact that I was gone from my home church for 17 years helped me to overcome the challenges of family and commonality. It also helped me in establishing myself as leader, because even though I was one of them, and grew up there, I had been away for a while. So there was freshness to my coming as pastor.

ADVANTAGES

Although there are disadvantages, there are certain advantages to pastoring your home church. First and foremost, you understand the culture of that church. One doesn't have to wait to find out what kind of worship is a "fit." Often you know immediately that certain things won't work, at least not at that time, so you avoid the criticism that some pastors would have to endure. At Sixth Avenue, I knew the style of worship, for example. I knew that it was a church that had a rich tradition of choir singing, and even if we moved to contemporary choruses (which we have), it would still be necessary to have a choir.

You have an understanding of the demographics of the area and the history of the church. I did not know the history of the first church that I pastored. I did not know what traditions were more sacred than others or

what things could be changed immediately. For example, I do not know how my first church would have responded to my going back to school, or even if I would have gone back. But, I knew Sixth Avenue valued education highly because Dr. Leonard Carroll was pastor there when I was born. To some, he is still the "measuring stick" of a pastor. Consequently, Sixth Avenue was and is a congregation that values a trained minister. So when I began my doctoral work in 2001, it was welcomed and encouraged.

Yet, the greatest advantage is what I would call "connections." I was connected to some in the church relationally—at least as far as we had known each other for years. Obviously, it wasn't a struggle to learn names and remember them! Some of the people had taught me as a child in Sunday school, and I have known them all my life. I was connected or "plugged in" to the community almost immediately. For example, the current mayor of our city and I went to high school together. He was, prior to that and still is, the chief deputy for our county. So if we need a street blocked off for an event, it is not that difficult to get it done. Many people in the community I knew prior to arriving, so I was comfortable in approaching them about needs of the church and plans for the future.

"Good decision, Dad," is a statement I remember and words that I now believe to be true. There are challenges to pastoring your home church, but the advantages and rewards of making a difference in the lives of family and friends is worth it! ■



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by MARTHA AIRKS

MUCH IS LITTLE When God Is in It

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting (Micah 5:2 KJV).

ALWAYS KEEP THIS IN MIND: When you are down to nothing, God is up to something!

Little is defined as “small in size, amount, or degree.” It is often used to convey an appealing diminutiveness, or express an affectionate or condescending attitude. Not only can the word *little* be used to express volume, it can also be used to put down someone or some thing—such as when the Enemy tells us we are nothing or we have nothing.

We often use the word *little* to describe how we feel about something or someone. I am reminded here of David’s encounter with Goliath as recorded in 1 Samuel 17:42-45:

And when the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he disdained him: for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and of a fair countenance. And the Philistine said unto David, Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field. Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied (1 Samuel 17:42-45 KJV).

Goliath ridiculed David for his size. Goliath probably considered it an insult that the little runt David thought he could take him down. What Goliath didn’t realize was that it was not about little David or his little stones, but rather about the greatness of God. Goliath missed the opportunity to learn about greatness, and we will also if we are not careful.



**DO YOU PICTURE
YOURSELF AS HAVING
LITTLE FAITH, LITTLE
STRENGTH, OR LITTLE
TALENT? ON WHAT DO
YOU PUT LIMITATIONS
OF LITTLE?**

Sometimes, it is the little things that matter most. What is your little thing? Do you picture yourself as having little faith, little strength, or little talent? On what do you put limitations of little?

First Kings 17:8-16 tells the story of a widow to whom God sent Elijah the prophet:

And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee. So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink. And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand. And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die. And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth. And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days (1 Kings 17:8-15 KJV).

What did the widow tell Elijah? She spoke death over herself and her child by saying, "I have but a handful of meal and a little oil. I am going in to make a small cake for me and my son and then we are going to die." Parents, do you speak life or death over your children?

Do you think the widow was riding high on faith at the moment? No! She had little resources; she was down to nothing. But when the man of God made her an offer, faith stepped in. Her needs were met because she took her little resource and added it to God's promise, and a miracle came forth!

Elijah's words were, "Fear not." However, when you are running low on money, food, or any resources, it is difficult not to fear. Several years ago, our son DeWayne was gravely ill with cancer and taking chemotherapy. I wasn't working, and my husband, Anthony, was doing all he could to sustain the family. During that time, we learned a great lesson: Whatever you bless, God increases. DeWayne wanted some cantaloupe and we had a little—and I mean *little*—cantaloupe. We blessed it, and it filled two bowls!

Another story of little resources is found in Mark 12. Here is another widow. The high

and mighty of her day looked upon her as if she had no place, but when she dropped those two little mites in the collection box, heaven took notice. Jesus said the two little mites meant more than all the other offerings because the widow gave ungrudgingly and not to receive men's praise.

Are you relying on little faith? The mustard seed starts out so small that if you drop it you might never be able to find it, but when you place it in the soil, give it some water, and a little bit of time, it will turn into a mighty plant that birds feel comfortable to lodge in (See Matthew 13:31). I love this parable because it reminds me that God is always willing to show us just how mighty He is, if we will just stop and pay attention!

God doesn't see little or small; He sees His abilities in us, and He isn't concerned with how little we have, He is only concerned with what we do with it! There was once a little boy with a few little fish going to hear the Master speak. As the day wore on, it was realized that it was getting late and all these thousands of people would need to eat soon. God knew this would happen; it did not take Him by surprise. It was for His glory! A few little fish made a meal big enough to feed a multitude and then some.

Did you see the trend? Little is much, when God is in it! Bethlehem was a little place and nothing good ever came out of there until our Savior came forth! The fish, the mustard tree, the cruse of oil all have the same theme in common—God was at the center of all of them.

Without God, the fish would have stayed small, the widow's mite would have amounted to nothing, and the cruse of oil would have run out; however, because God was the one orchestrating the plan, everything fell into place. Without God, we are limited, powerless, and unworthy, but when we let Him take over, our faith, resources, and strength are limitless. Jesus said, "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much" (Luke 16:10). If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities.

What is your little thing? Little talent cannot be an excuse, because we can all do something. Sometimes our littlest words make the strongest testimonies. Think how far these little words go: "Jesus loves you; I love you; I understand; I care; I'm sorry!" But Jesus said it best on the cross: "It is finished!"

We need to ask ourselves, *Am I answering the call? Am I following the anointing?*

I close with the words of an old hymn . . .

*Does the place you're called to labor
Seem too small and little known?
It is great if God is in it,
And He'll not forget His own.*

Our little will be much when God is in it! ■

Martha Airks and her husband, Anthony, are Church of God ministers in Alabama. Anthony Airks is an ordained minister and Martha is currently a candidate for exhorter credentials.

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Passing the TORCH

by B. PAUL JONES and
BOBBY G. DUNCAN

BY THE TIME Moses stood before the congregation of Israel for his final charge to them, 40 years had passed since God had spoken to him from a burning bush in Horeb (Ex. 3:4-10). He had faithfully led Israel from Egypt to Canaan, following the course God had prescribed. In the process, he had coped with Israel's hunger, thirst, discord, murmuring, surrounding enemies, and, for a while, had personally shouldered the countless burdens of the entire congregation. Now as he neared the end of his journey, he prepared to pass the torch of leadership to a devout and dedicated younger man, Joshua (Deut. 31:1-2, 7-8).

God had fulfilled His purpose in Moses, having chosen him for that particular moment in history. Now came the time for a new leader—not a clone of Moses,

but someone quite different, one gifted for the task of settling Israel into this new land. It was no more Moses' calling to do this highly logistical work than it was for Joshua to aggressively lead a murmuring and complaining Israel on a 40-year wilderness journey. Each filled the role for which God had selected him.

At some point, leadership *will* change. No one can alter that reality. Pastors and church leaders do age and retire, and they are inevitably replaced and eventually depart to be with the Lord. Therefore, under no circumstance should leadership transition prompt surprise, nor should it generate conflict. Since virtually every minister, at some point, will be part of this transition process, it is important to understand the dynamics involved and make necessary preparations, spiritually and emotionally, to face the chal-

lenges that accompany them. There is no reason for these anticipated changes to throw ministers and churches out of balance and into the throes of disagreement and discontentment.

Unfortunately, reality reveals a different picture. Leadership transition often engenders suspicion, strife, jealousy, protectionism, and resentment. Although the list of potential areas of conflict is quite long, frequently the tension between a long-term church leader, especially a pastor, and his successor occurs because of some measure of insecurity, causing many ministers to feel diminished by the strengths and gifts of others. Yet, insecurity is never an excuse to mistreat anyone. God demands His ministers get control of their emotions, deal with their insecurities, and *always* do what is biblical.

A successor should never feel the need to fill his predecessor's shoes, because he never can. He has his own shoes to fill, and if he does that, God will take care of the rest. For example, conflicts arise when a new pastor feels diminished because church members continue to express intense adoration for their former pastor. In trying to establish his position as *the* pastor, he feels compelled to keep the focus from the former leader, especially if that leader is a retiree who remains in the local church. He feels unaccepted when someone calls his predecessor about anything significant, and takes it personally when a parishioner calls upon the retired minister to do a funeral or wedding he feels he should do. Additionally, if the predecessor is an exceptional pulpiteer,

he is afraid to let him preach in his pulpit anymore—again, concerned that he, the successor, might appear lessened in the eyes of the people.

On the other hand, frustration arises when a retiring pastor who remains in the church continues covertly as the spiritual leader. That is, he takes pleasure in church members coming to him with their concerns, while he makes it clear that he wants the church to remain on the same course of ministry he set. Adding to this, he may also feel lessened by the gifts of his successor, thinking no one any longer remembers and appreciates his contribution to the church.

Some of these concerns also exist in virtually any pastoral change. For example, some relocating pastors have difficulty disconnecting from their former pastorate. They continue to field questions and offer aid and comfort to former members who may be disillusioned with their new pastor. Likewise, incoming pastors often cringe when members in their new pastorate talk mostly, and most favorably, about their previous pastor.

What message are we as spiritual leaders sending to our fellow believers during these necessary transition times? Does our transference or reception of the torch of leadership reflect God's grace and goodness, or does it honor Him at all?

With all the challenges Moses faced in leading Israel 40 years through the wilderness, he managed, by God's strength, to work through them. Though he made his share of mistakes, interestingly, a single act recorded in Numbers 20:7-12—an act of

angrily striking a rock to which God instructed him to speak—kept him from entering the land that flowed with milk and honey.

God made clear to Moses that his foremost error rested in his failure to hallow, or sanctify, Him before the people. Although the Israelites knew God led them, they couldn't see Him, at least not in physical form. They *could* see Moses, and because he was visible, they looked to him. Moses represented God, and just as the children of Israel looked to him as God's representative then, believers today look to God's delegated authorities to represent Him. Consequently, it's as important now as it was then for Christian leaders to honor and sanctify God before the people. However, leaders are often tempted to focus more on their own personal interests and feelings and are frequently inclined to become territorial and defensive, carefully guarding their positions of leadership in ministry, as if the ministry belonged to them. It doesn't. The work is *God's* work; the ministries are *His* ministries.

When transitioning pastors and church leaders feel they have to devalue each other to protect their own image, they do so in the presence of all the people. Everyone sees and feels the effects of the conflict. These ministers do the same thing Moses did—they misrepresent God. They fail to sanctify Him in the presence of His people.

Passing the torch of leadership in an unselfish manner may not always be easy, but it is always biblical. The lesson every minister must learn is that God never intended differences to be divisive, but com-

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plementary. God's servants can only utilize the gifts God gave them. If they try to be someone else, they fail. If they are faithful in being the ministers God called them to be, they succeed. It is important to know that a predecessor's success in no way diminishes the successor; neither do the accomplishments of a successor lessen the predecessor's contribution to the kingdom of God.

Ministers of the gospel must take up the torch of leadership from someone who has preceded them, and, in due time, pass it along to someone who follows them. Christian duty, then, demands that leaders do both in the right spirit and with the right attitude, displaying the kind of character that pleases the One who called them. God will do the rest. Jesus said it best in Matthew 7:12: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them" (NKJV). ■

*Pastors Paul Jones and Bob Duncan have successfully experienced such a transition and detail it in their book, **Passing the Torch**, available at Derek Press for \$10.99.*

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K A I O

KNOWLEDGE – AWARENESS – INTENTIONALITY – OBEDIENCE

A DISCIPLESHIP JOURNEY

WHAT COMES TO MIND when I say the word “discipleship”? Classes? Learning? Books? Information about Jesus? What if, when I say discipleship, you thought of obedience, follow through, and doing the will of the Father? What if we have labeled discipleship as input, when it was always meant to be output? The measuring stick for truly loving Jesus was never about how much we learned or facts we accumulated. Rather, it’s measured through obedience. John 14:21 says it this way: “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him” (NKJV).

In 2014, I began a discipleship model that utilized small groups. The small group is a simple format of sharing testimonies of being obedient to the Holy Spirit, encouraging one another, and holding one another accountable. These three simple steps led over 100 men and women into having fresh testimonies weekly and sharing stories about what God was doing in their lives.

I have been in full-time ministry for the past 11 years and there has always existed this troublesome itch that was just out of my reach to scratch. It was this feeling of discernment that something was off and that something was missing concerning discipleship. As a church, we had successfully drawn the crowds. We had met our budget goals for missions. We had paid off our mortgage

on the building. We had incredible services, saw miracles and healings, put on incredibly well attended conferences; but in spite of all of these things, something was missing. My heart felt discontent. I felt led by the Spirit, but I still felt that there was a gap between what we were experiencing inside our four walls and the impact we could be having on the surrounding community. Then one day in prayer, I came across a verse I had seen many times— Ephesians 4:12: “To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...” Somewhere along the way, I had become the minister and my people had become in need of ministry, rather than being men and women doing the ministry.

Not much later, another verse jumped out at me from Hebrews 10:24: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (NIV 1984). How do you spur someone on? How often was I doing that? Nowhere in the Word does God commission Himself to spur us on. That is the role of the body of Christ.

There were only three ways I was ever spurred on in all my years as a believer. I have a friend in ministry who is closer than a brother, and over the years, we found ourselves doing the following for each other:

1. We held one another accountable for what we said we were going to do.
2. We stir each other up through testimony.
3. We give one another prophetic words and lift each other up in prayer.

As a congregation, I observed that we

were information-driven. We acquired this information through classes and conferences. I brought in well-known speakers to train and equip the people. Even though they were trained by the best, it seemed like the greatest commandments—loving God and loving others—were not increasing. It was exciting to be trained, and the people attended. But, there was no practical outlet to walk out the commands of Jesus.

I felt dissatisfied with information, and as a result, God began to reveal something to me. In the Greek mindset, learning is simply the process of being able to repeat information and know what your teacher knows. The Hebrew mindset, however, teaches that in order to be a true disciple of a teacher, you must be able to do what your teacher can do. If Jesus can heal the sick, it's critical that His disciples be able to do so as well. It's no different when it comes to casting out demons. The Great Commission itself is the call to walk, live, and do what Jesus did (see Mark 16:14-18).

Information doesn't change people. If it did, America itself would look completely different. However, it's the people who are willing to allow God to show them what is possible by His grace and humble themselves low enough to receive it.

In the fall of 2013, I felt God leading me to take over one of the cleaning roles of the custodian of our church. I told her what I intended to do and promised her I would do it every week. The first time I cleaned this specific area of the church I felt the presence of God. It was awesome. Every time after

that initial experience, I cleaned without an overwhelming experience whatsoever. By the New Year, I was still cleaning, and I felt like God asked me this question: “Why are you still cleaning?”

I replied, “Because you asked me to.”

He then said, “I have asked you to do many things. Why the diligence around this specific command?”

It hit me like a ton of bricks. I was so diligent because someone would know if I weren’t. The custodian would look bad if I didn’t do what I said I would do. It wasn’t just about accountability; it was about integrity. I had said I would clean, and when those words left my mouth, I knew that I had to do what I said I was going to do.

How many conferences and classes have we sat through without ever looking someone in the eye and saying how we were going to change in light of the new understanding we had acquired? We typically don’t make any changes. We go back to our own bubble of a private life to live as we did before, except feeling a little more puffed up with the information we acquired.

One day in prayer God showed me four words: KNOWLEDGE – AWARENESS – INTENTIONALITY – OBEDIENCE. The two middle words caught my attention. Knowledge certainly was not the problem. We all knew what Jesus said. Obedience was lacking, but it was only because of the two middle words not being manifested in our lives. What if AWARENESS and INTENTIONALITY were emphasized? How could one do that? It occurred to me that

the only way this could be done was through individuals belonging in small communities that held each other accountable to God until obedience was attained. This was so different to anything I had ever done before, because normally the culture of small groups is a time to socialize, connect with one another, learn information through book studies, and share opinions concerning the information gained. It’s not that any of these things are bad or even wrong; it’s just that there’s been very little transformation or testimony as a result of this approach.

I sat with the Holy Spirit every night for two months writing a structure with biblical convictions that would bring about a platform of change within the people at my church. Shortly after those convictions were written, a handbook was created. I then gathered the people to introduce a forgotten way of doing Christianity together. We went from having a few testimonies to over 100 testimonies by the third week. We had corporately pressed through barriers that I never knew existed. Strongholds in thinking were brought to the floor, and Christ as Lord was raised to His proper place in the lives of the church members. In a time when we sing about how much we love God, we forget that He has always preferred a broken heart to a mind filled with knowledge, humility more than words, and obedience more than sacrifice.

Spur one another on! ■

Adam Bower is pastor of the Praise Community Church of God in York, PA.

Ministry to the “NEIGHBOR KIDS”

by DANIEL WALKER

DOES IT REALLY SURPRISE anyone when a pastor gets excited about any opportunity to minister to teenagers? I don't think so. If a pastor isn't excited about the work that he/she is called to execute, then, without a doubt, something is wrong. Anyone who doesn't get excited about teenagers, in general, is missing out on the best that God has to offer. There's nothing like making a connection with a young person, especially when a pastor like me is so completely different from the teenagers he is trying to reach.

Obviously, I am one of those excitable pastors. I shepherd this amazing inner-city church—“Life Church”—in Nashville, Tenn. Our local high school—Maplewood—is around 200 yards away from our front door. Until about four years ago, our church had nothing to do with Maplewood High School. Life Church and Maplewood High School were two completely different entities! Life Church was filled with really nice, normal, mostly

white, Christians. Maplewood was a high school in trouble. Their school report card was terrible. They were ranked in the bottom 25 in the nation. Yikes! The year before Life Church got involved with Maplewood, 101 felony arrests were made among the student body. Many of the students of Maplewood come from difficult home situations. No doubt, life is much more difficult for “our kids” at Maplewood.

Our youth pastor came to my office one afternoon presenting a passionate plea for involvement in Maplewood. It wasn't a hard sell for me due to the fact that my wife and I love teen ministry. However, there



were a few glitches in the plan to reach Maplewood. First of all, Maplewood was the quintessential idea of an “inner-city school.” Now that caricature is accurate with all the descriptive bells and whistles that come along with our imaginations, forged no doubt, from movies and shows depicting the plight of the inner-city teenager.

Second, Life Church was “busted.” We had just completed two crazy, expensive, city-mandated repairs to our buildings that completely exhausted our finances. How could we take on ministering to a high school or any other ministry for that matter? I realize the spiritual crowd will read that statement and ask: Where’s your faith? Trust me when I say, it’s tougher to live a “dependence-on-God ministry” than an armchair-spiritual quarterback can imagine.

Third, and biggest challenge is my race. Maplewood is a minority dominant, inner-city school. These kids face difficulties and persecution that I can’t possibly understand. To say otherwise is to be naive at best. I understood how God could use our youth pastor to reach these precious teenagers. He’s a handsome young black man with personality and presentation skills. I, however, am middle-aged, white, and a hillbilly. I am a seminarian. I love to read and study. I am very different from most teenagers. Although the teens from Maplewood and Life Church sense that certain “Daddy-love,” anointing from me, they know that I am not athletic, hip, or cool. The kids, however, seem to know my heart toward them. I want nothing from them; and I love them

dearly. After all, they are my kids. God has called me to love them.

I would love to say that I was at least a little cool when I was young, but I think I’ve always been a little clumsy socially. It’s ok to call me nerdy. It’s true, and as the teenagers would say, “I’m down with it.” There’s nothing wrong with being different as long as we don’t use our differences as an excuse to remain separate. Nothing should!

To skip all my shortcomings and legitimate reasons why I wasn’t suited for Maplewood ministry, I’ll be transparent. I was intimidated. I knew my heart toward God and the teenagers. I also knew that I would gladly give my life for any one of them. The challenge for me was that God wanted me to live for them. The older I get, the greater the challenge that connecting with teenagers becomes. I truly desire to connect with all our children—both teens and young adults. I don’t want to leave this “love task” for someone else who may appear to be better suited for the job. I wanted them to have a fond recollection of the frumpy pastor who loved them so intentionally. However, love was not and is not enough. God spoke clearly that I was to deeply engage this entire high school—staff, students, parents, leaders—and I had no idea what I was doing.

God began the process by introducing Life Church to Maplewood High School in October 2011. I prayed diligently for an introduction. God swung open the doors and answered my unconventional prayers. Over a matter of days, the principals and teachers had agreed to allow our team at Life

Church to provide the pregame meals for all the basketball teams and cheerleaders. We were then allowed to operate the concession stands at the basketball and football games. I even drove the team several times to and from games.

I know these kids, and they know me. There is no greater feeling of achievement than to have a teenager, who is entirely different from you, shout your name and come in close for a hug or maybe a quiet prayer in the hallway or in a bus. I have discovered joy—a joy I had never known before my time with Maplewood High School.

I have been involved in numerous revival type events such as General Assemblies, state camp meetings, youth camps, winter-fests, local church revivals with big name speakers, and so on; but, in all my years as a musician/worship leader and pastor, I have

never experienced revival in a more pure form than I have while serving the team meals and working in the concession stands of Maplewood.

In the first year of Maplewood ministry, I led 12 students in the sinner's prayer. In the second year, that number more than doubled to 30. By the third year, we were privileged to include some of the other high school teams in our pregame meals and devotionals, which led to 24 students from rival high schools coming to Christ from a 15-minute devotional. More than 50 salvations were recorded that year. Our current year has started. So far, 18 students have given their hearts to Jesus. It will be exciting to see what God will do with the rest of the season. ■

Dr. Daniel Walker is pastor of the Life Church in Nashville, Tennessee.

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“THAT IS NOT WHAT WE NEED”

Determining the Best Way to Minister to the Local Community

by JOSÉ DANIEL MONTAÑEZ

RECENTLY HEARD the story of a powerful church in a large city in the northeast of the United States. As it has happened to many churches that were in the midst of a predominantly white community, the ethnic composition of the neighborhood began to change until the church found itself surrounded by neighbors who looked very different from those who comprised the congregation. With a sincere desire to minister to their community, this church did a survey to find out what the main needs were of this changing community.

The majority of the community agreed that their biggest need was to have a job

training center. The leaders of the church had several meetings and agreed to establish a counseling center to serve their neighbors. The church opened the center, but two years later had to close its doors.

Researchers asked the leaders of the church why the center did not become a success. The response was swift: “The people in the community did not want to participate in our counseling program.”

It seems that neither the church nor its leaders have understood the clear and loud response of the community: “That is not what we need.”

When as a church, we plan to fulfill our social mission in the communities where

**WE MUST GO OUT
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CAN MEET THEM.**

God has planted us, we must take into consideration the following facts:

WE MUST NOT PRESUME THAT WE KNOW WHAT THE COMMUNITY NEEDS

It is very daring and even presumptuous to believe we know the needs of our neighbors. Our communities are in constant transformation, and we don't really know their many needs. This is even truer in those churches where the majority of its members, leaders, and the pastor commute once or twice a week to the neighborhood. The church was established by their parents and grandparents who were residents of that community.

WE MUST ASK THE COMMUNITY TO STATE THEIR NEEDS

Sometimes, this is difficult to do, because we fear the answer. We say to ourselves, what if we can't provide what they need? What should we do if our social

assistance budget is not enough to meet the need? This approach is wrong, because once again we are placing ourselves and our churches before our neighbors. We must go out and ask by visiting homes and establishments, and fearlessly inquiring of people what their needs are and how the Church can meet them.

WE MUST RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF OUR COMMUNITY

As long as we are able, we must start to take small steps to meet the needs identified by our neighbors, whether it is to help them clean the yard, repair what is broken, replace the splintered glass from a window, or provide transportation to the doctor or pharmacy. Everything we do must be a response to a need identified and expressed by our neighbors, because ultimately it will be the neighbors, and not us, who will determine if the church was effective.

The response of Jesus to the disciples of John in Matthew 11:5, teaches us a great lesson about meeting human need. Jesus said: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (KJV).

This is a role model for meeting needs with wisdom and relevant actions, so that nobody will say: "That is not what we need." ■

José Daniel Montañez, D.Min. is pastor of the Central Church of God / Iglesia de Dios Central de San Antonio

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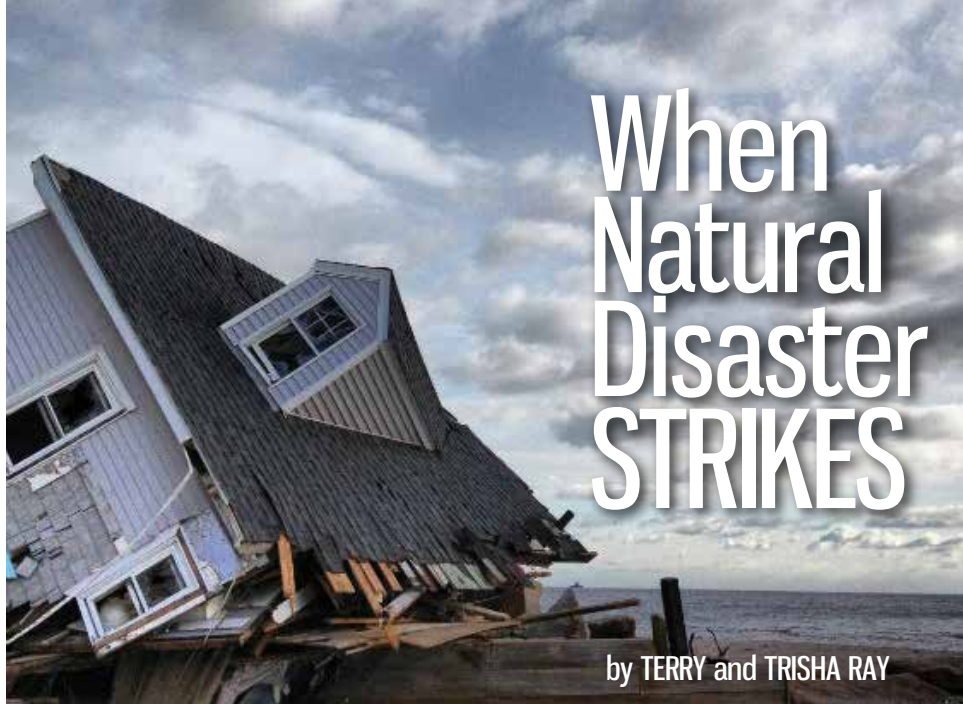
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When Natural Disaster STRIKES

by TERRY and TRISHA RAY

WHEN HURRICANE KATRINA struck on August 29, 2005, it was truly devastating. Many lives were lost, and many homes were destroyed. But, as only God knows how to do things, He brought hope through a seemingly hopeless situation. His purposes in blessing those He loves are carried out through His people. We learned some important things about responding to natural disasters, such as the following:

NOT BEING AFRAID TO RESPOND TO THE NEED

Natural disasters can happen anywhere, anytime, but some areas seem to be more susceptible to them than others. Whether it is a first-time experience or not, responding to the disaster can provide some of the

greatest ministry opportunities ever. Many have compassionate hearts to help, but it's usually the lack of knowledge/experience that produces a certain fear that will often stop people from responding. True Christianity is all about putting into practice what we believe. We are reminded that God wants us to be bold and courageous, because He is with us and for us, and all things are possible with Him!

Obviously, your family should be your number one priority; make sure they are safe and provided for before venturing out to meet the needs of others. Then, simply step out by faith with a willing heart, go into the areas you've never dreamed you'd go, and do what God sets before you. Our neighborhood was in decent shape; but it was areas we weren't used to going to that needed the most

help. We wound up reaching out to several parishes (counties) and getting involved with many different cultures of people.

BEING WILLING TO WORK WITH WHATEVER RESOURCES GOD PROVIDES

Such disasters will most likely require more than what we're normally used to working with to meet needs. There are wonderful agencies out there that are quick to respond to such needs. They are also better equipped than most local churches or agencies. God uses government and humanitarian agencies, as well as the faith-based community. We have to be willing to work with whatever connections He enables us to make.

We were blessed to work with folks from Operation Compassion, Convey of Hope, Feed the Children, Red Cross, Catholic Charities, Operation Blessing, Salvation Army, Common Ground, youth groups, college students, pro sports teams, senior-adult groups, missionaries, evangelists, pastors, and even politicians!

FINDING A NEED AND FILLING IT; FINDING A HURT AND HEALING IT

No matter the size or impact of a disaster, the needs will always be met one person at a time. The distribution of supplies, and how it is done, is essential. There will only be enough to go around when wisdom and discernment are exercised. Need can quickly turn into greed. However, the strong majority of people we served in distribution lines

GOD USES GOVERNMENT AND HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES, AS WELL AS THE FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY. WE HAVE TO BE WILLING TO WORK WITH WHATEVER CONNECTIONS HE ENABLES US TO MAKE.

(sometimes stretching over two miles long) appreciated what we had to give. But there were still some who complained, and they even drove off without anything. Some were just not willing to comply with the rules; but many were still dealing with their hurts and losses with anger.

One of the greatest groups we worked with were people who had lost everything, but they wanted to help others. Something even more valuable than supplies were the smiles, hugs, and prayers shared, even through open car windows, or when we simply stopped long enough to hear someone's story, which made a huge difference. Sometimes, we would simply drive through areas with cold bottles of water, along with snack crackers, hand sanitizer, and miscellaneous cleaning supplies, randomly meeting folks who were just getting back and trying to salvage what they could of their homes and effects. We were also blessed to pray with government leaders and law enforcement personnel.

Also, there has to be the ability to adjust to the needs. Supply distribution was only

one part of the needs getting met. Help was also needed with gutting houses, paperwork, phone calls, transportation, and more. As the overall recovery process continues, stores, businesses, and offices eventually reopen, and they can then help meet many needs, which will provide a more “scaled-back” approach with what has been done.

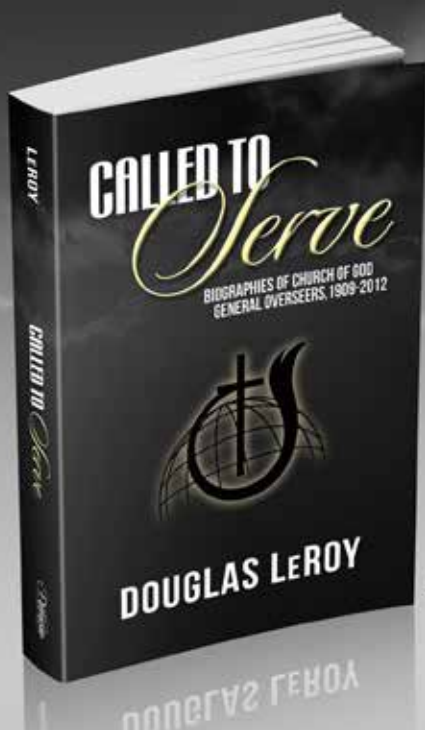
LEARNING WHAT GOD IS TEACHING

God seldom blesses us today, without enabling us to use that blessing tomorrow. It is always an honor to be chosen and trusted by Him to do anything that helps others and brings Him glory. Since life is a continuous learning experience, disasters can suddenly become “crash courses” that are

not only helpful for that particular season, but also very insightful for the future as well. The more we are willing to learn, the more He can trust us to do more.

God will often use those experiences to launch us into such ministries of help in and through our local churches. Using the same willingness and courage to help those in need, supplies can be collected and distributed; stories can be heard; prayers can be made; and a certain readiness for the next disaster will be in place. We are forever grateful for the experiences we had, the people we met, and the positive differences made. ■

Terry and Trisha Ray pastor the New Day Christian Center of New Orleans and chaplains of the New Orleans Mission



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Editor's Note:
With this issue of Engage we introduce the **Pentecostal Minister Flashback** where we will reprint articles written by authors from the forerunner of Engage. The articles will be reprinted as they were presented, so dates and cultural references will reflect the period. But, most of the advice and research is still applicable to ministry today.

Pentecostal Minister **FLASH BACK**

THE PASTOR AND THE CHURCH COUNCIL

By Wendell Smith • Spring 1981

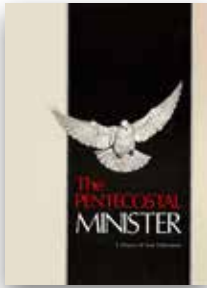
BILLY MARTIN, manager for the Oakland A's, has created a formula for managerial success which he shared in a recent issue of *Sports Illustrated*. "You'll have fifteen guys who will run through a wall for you, five who hate you, and five who are undecided. The trick is to keep the five who hate you away from the five who are undecided." At times, possibly, you have felt like a graduate of the Billy Martin School of Management in church business.

Some pastors may be hesitant to accept the pastorate of a particular church because of the domineering reputation of the Church Council. Others may seldom have Council meetings because of the personality conflicts that often erupt in the meetings. The ability to work harmoniously with the elected leaders of the church can go a long way in ensuring a successful pastorate. I would like to make a few observations from my own pastoral experience regarding pastor/Church Council relationships:

ATTITUDE IS IMPORTANT

If I am willing to show respect to the Council members, they are then more willing to accept me in the role of leader. This can be done by involving them in the following:

- Installation service.



- Assisting in praying for the sick and welcoming new members into the church.
- Serving Communion.

It is important that I have a proper attitude toward myself. I want my Council to see me as a spiritual man. Often lay people assume that pastors have only a professional interest in them and that they desire their company only when their service (or their money) is needed. As a result, the Church Council will differ very little from the Board of Directors of a corporation—handling only the business—which is a far cry from being under-shepherds responsible for the care of the people of God.

It is a wise pastor who gives priority to the development and nurture of a caring, supportive relationship between himself and those with whom he serves. That relationship should begin in the Council meeting. There the pastor demonstrates whether he is a dictator, friend, or servant.

APPROACH IS VITAL

The Council meeting should be scheduled on a regular basis. Some pastors prefer to have only special “called” meetings (possibly feeling that this gives the pastor more of an authoritarian role). I have found that this erratic way of doing business serves only to create additional problems.

- Business done irregularly can quickly change from solving minor problems to serious considerations.
- Meetings held only when emergencies arise tend to become so lengthy that the Council members will become irregular in their attendance.
- Irregular meetings put unnecessary pressure on the pastor to solve problems in a short period of time. The status of the pastor as a leader can quickly shrink if this pattern is continued.

The Council meeting should be entered into as a spiritual experience. This can be realized by opening with Scripture reading and a time of worshiping together in prayer. It is often beneficial to make this worship period from twenty to thirty minutes in



duration. It is amazing how close you can feel to a man when you have been on your knees next to him in prayer. This approach to a meeting will often completely eliminate from the discussion those things which would create discord.

The pastor must always set the tone of the meeting. In our culture, conflict implies a win/loss situation. If the pastor refuses to enter into open conflict but acts out of love, there is no time when a Council member feels that he is a loser.

AN AGENDA IS HELPFUL


Informality and looseness has too long characterized our manner of conducting church business. A written agenda will enable the council to approach the business in a serious manner. It will also keep the meeting moving, thus eliminating a late adjournment, and prevent the meeting from becoming a gossiping session.

ABILITY IS ACCESSIBLE

Much of the pressure upon us pastors is self-inflicted. It is totally impossible for one man to oversee adequately the complex operation of a church (however small). The Church Council is an ideal resource from which the pastor can recruit individuals to share the responsibility in the leadership role. These men can head such committees as finance, maintenance, transportation (pick up senior adults and direct parking at the church), education, evangelism, and so forth. When responsibility is delegated, include a job description. Don't give a man a job without telling him what to do.

As we sit with these men, our spiritual brothers, and reflect upon past victories and present goals, let us remember the words of Elisabeth Eliot, who said, "God is not the accomplice of our work; He is the work. We are merely His tools in getting it done." ■

*(In the spring of 1981, **Wendell Smith** was serving as pastor of the East Ridge Church of God, in East Ridge, Tennessee).*



The Most COMMON FACTOR in Declining Churches

by THOM S. RAINER

RECENTLY, I FOCUSED on seven very practical habits of churches that have an outward focus. I am honored and humbled to be in a place where I get to hear from and study about thousands of churches. The leaders and congregants in those churches provide me with incredible information and data. I am grateful, because I'm not smart enough to understand these issues on my own.

As God has allowed me to study congregations for more than 25 years, I began to see a common pattern in churches that had become outwardly focused. You read some of the practical steps these churches have taken in the earlier post.

THE MOST COMMON FACTOR

Conversely, though, I also can see a simple but profound pattern among the declining churches.

Stated simply, the most common factor in declining churches is an inward focus.

The ministries are only for the members. The budgetary funds are used almost exclu-

sively to meet the needs of the members. The times of worship and worship styles are geared primarily for the members. Conflict takes place when members don't get things their way. You get the picture.

WARNING SYMPTOMS

After studying and consulting with thousands of churches, I began to see clearly this pattern. Even more, I began to recognize symptoms of an inward focus. See if you recognize a few of these.

- There are very few attempts to minister to those in the community.
- Church business meetings become arguments over preferences and desires.
- Numbers of members in the congregation are openly critical of the pastor, other church staff, and lay leaders in the church.
- Any change necessary to become a Great Commission church is met with anger and resistance.
- Culture is seen as the enemy instead of an opportunity for believers to become salt and light.

• Pastors and other leaders in the church become discouraged and withdraw from effective leadership.

• The past becomes the hero.

• If the churches are part of a denomination or similar affiliation, meetings of those denominations mirror the churches in lost focus and divisiveness.

THERE IS HOPE

For those of us in Christ, however, there is always hope—His hope.

I have written in recent years about the dire straits of most of our churches. I have felt it necessary to do so in order to face the facts. Indeed, I have written in my most recent book about the deaths of many churches.

In the weeks and months ahead, however, you will be hearing from me about

churches that are defying the negative trends. You will hear more about church leaders who are dreaming again. You will hear about revitalized churches. This fall, I will deliver to your computers a multihour video conference about these exciting times.

I don't have my head in the sand. I know times are tough in many churches. I know congregations are dying every day. I know many church leaders are discouraged.

But we serve the God of hope.

Decline in our churches does not have to be a reality. ■

*This article was originally published at ThomRainer.com on June 2, 2014. **Thom S. Rainer** serves as president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources. Dr. Rainer can be found on Twitter @ThomRainer and at facebook.com/Thom.S.Rainer.*

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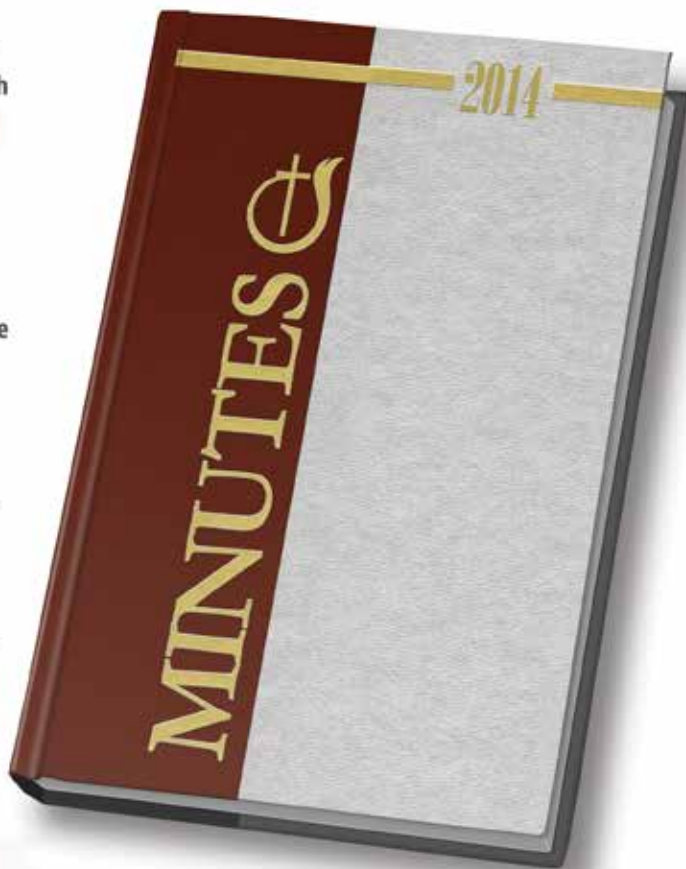
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2014 CHURCH OF GOD GENERAL ASSEMBLY MINUTES

You need the "new" 2014 edition of the book of *Minutes*. The 75th Church of God International General Assembly approved 56 items of business affecting the contents of the book of *Minutes*. These were deletions from, and changes and additions to the contents. In addition to these, the contents of the book under the five major divisions of Church Government have been significantly rearranged, so that most of the Section numbers (S1. through S73.) are no longer with the content they previously identified. All rulings of the Church of God General Assemblies, 1906 through 2014, still in effect, are contained in the 2014 book of *Minutes*.

—Daniel L. Black, editor
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LEGAL NOTES
Dennis W. Watkins

“Same-Sex” Marriage Policy

AT THE 2014 Church of God International General Assembly, our Church enacted an amendment to the *International General Assembly Minutes*, regarding marriage and same-gender relationships. The purpose of that language was to reaffirm the Church of God’s position that our definition of marriage is based on God’s Word and that Christian marriage between a man and a woman reflects the theological truth of Christ’s love for His church. The measure as passed at the International General Assembly made it against our polity for our ministers to officiate at these marriages, or for our churches to be used for such ceremonies.

As predicted, the evolution of this issue in the courts around the United States has taken a rapid course toward recognition of same-gender marriages and relationships. It is likely that this will be the course for the future.

Numerous Church of God ministers have contacted me, asking whether or not they legally would be required to perform same-sex marriages and what to do if posed with this question. It should be pointed out

that in many, if not all, of the same-sex marriage statutes adopted around the country, there is an exemption or exception for those whose biblical beliefs are opposed to same-sex marriages. It is my hope that this trend continues.

While I cannot say that the following is a cure-all for our ministers confronted with this issue, I have drafted a policy statement for our pastors to use when asked to perform same-sex marriages, and I am reprinting that statement here, as part of this article. I hope that this assists you in answering questions regarding same-sex marriage demands.

STATEMENT BY PASTOR ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGES

1. I am a minister of the gospel, credentialed by the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee).

2. It is the long-established biblical/religious belief and polity of the Church of God, which belief and polity I adhere to, that marriage is a spiritual union in which a man and woman are joined by God to live together as one.

3. Based on my personal religious beliefs and the beliefs and polity of my credential-

ing Church, I refuse to perform same-sex marriages.

4. I base this refusal on my First Amendment guaranty of religious freedom, and on any and all exemptions granted to me under Federal and State laws.

5. This refusal also shall extend to my church's refusal to allow its facilities to be used for same-sex marriages or any celebration relating to same-sex unions.

CONCLUSION

I think we all can agree that this issue will continue to remain on the forefront of our attention for some time. The First

Amendment guaranty of free exercise of our religion likely will be our main line of defense regarding this issue.

The writer is not engaged in rendering legal or other professional services herein. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought. ■

Dennis W. Watkins is legal counsel for the Church of God. The writer is not engaged in rendering legal or other professional services herein. If legal advice or expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

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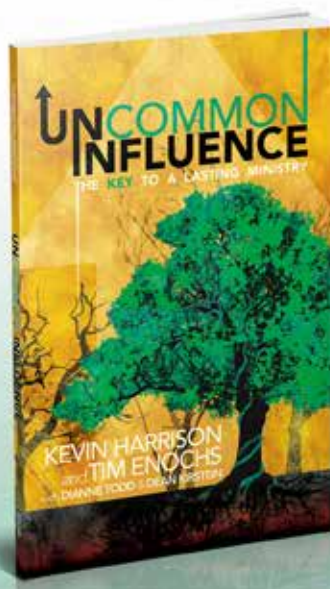
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MONEY MATTERS
Art Rhodes

No Reimbursement of Certain Health Insurance Policies With Pretax or After-Tax Dollars

WHILE MOST CHURCHES thought that they were exempt from the major impacts of the Affordable Care Act (often called “ACA” or “ObamaCare”), a seemingly innocuous Internal Revenue Service notice, issued in September 2013, has been interpreted to place many churches and businesses in the crossfire of the Affordable Care Act. As clarification has been sought on this provision, the regulations seem to have only brought about more onerous interpretations.

According to IRS Notice 2013-54, employers may no longer reimburse employees for, or directly pay, the cost of *individual* health insurance policy premiums and exclude such amounts from the employee’s gross income. Effective January 1, 2014,

these “employer payment plans” must be paid with “after tax” dollars, rather than with “pretax” dollars, and cannot be a “reimbursement.” The employer is only allowed to use “pretax” dollars to pay for health insurance premiums, if the employer offers a *group* health insurance plan.

Further, more recent guidance, issued within the last few weeks, has suggested that “reimbursement” by an employer of an *individual* health insurance policy premium creates a noncompliant health care plan under the Affordable Care Act—

and therefore subjects the employer to a **\$100 per day penalty**, per employee. According to this recent guidance, an employer/church who reimburses a pastor or staff member for their individual health insurance policy premium, *even if such is subject to*



taxes, has violated the Affordable Care Act and is subject to \$36,500 a year in penalties, per employee.

While an employer/church can increase an employee's salary to cover the costs of that employee's individual insurance policy—and can even increase the amount to cover additional taxes—it should not be deemed as reimbursement of the employee's individual health insurance policy premiums, nor should the employer/church request verification of the insurance premium costs. If the insurance premium notice is requested or provided, the U.S. Department of Labor's recent guidance suggests that such creates a noncompliant group health plan and triggers the penalties mentioned above.

Since an IRS revenue ruling in 1961, churches and businesses have been able to structure compensation plans where employees could obtain their own individual health care plan, provide documentation and substantiation of such to the employer, and the employer could reimburse the employee for, or directly pay, the cost of the individual health insurance policy premiums and such amounts were excluded from the employee's gross income. Under IRS Notice 2013-54, the Affordable Care Act no longer allows such an arrangement to occur with pretax dollars or even with after-tax dollars if such is deemed reimbursement. An employer can still withhold funds and transmit those to pay the premiums on the individual health insurance policy, as a convenience to the employee, but the amounts

BECAUSE THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT HAS CONVERTED THE POLICY PREMIUM PAYMENTS FROM PRETAX TO AFTER-TAX FUNDS FOR INDIVIDUAL HEALTH INSURANCE PLANS, **THE SELF-EMPLOYED MINISTER STANDS TO LOSE FORTY OR SO PERCENT OF THIS BENEFIT THAT WAS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED A FRINGE BENEFIT, ASSUMING STATE TAXES ARE DUE.**

must come from after-tax funds and cannot be reimbursements.

Consider the following examples:

1. A local church agrees to pay a pastor \$40,000 a year salary, plus pay another \$10,000 a year toward the pastor's individual health insurance premium. According to IRS Notice 2013-54, the pastor would have taxable income of \$50,000 in the year in question. It should be noted that the amount designated for insurance must be taxed whether the pastor has secured the health insurance independently or through the government-operated Health Care Exchange. Further, the pastor should not submit nor should the church require documentation of the pastor's individual health insurance premium costs.

2. A pastor's wife has health insurance through a *group* plan at her employment and her company pays the entirety of her premium. Such amounts paid by her company are not taxable income to her since she is covered by a *group* plan that meets the requirements of the Affordable Care Act.

In addition, her company offers full-family coverage, but the employee must pay the difference between the company-provided employee group coverage and the family-coverage premium. If the pastor's church offers to pay the additional \$500 per month to cover the pastor and the pastor's children, the \$500 per month is taxable income to the pastor. If documentation of the costs is requested or submitted, the church may be subject to the penalties discussed earlier.

As noted above, IRS Notice 2013-54 took effect January 1, 2014. Therefore, any additional amounts paid by a church to a pastor or staff member for that person's individual health insurance plan must be treated as taxable income. Treating such amounts as taxable income means that the amounts are subject to federal income taxes, state income taxes, and self-employment taxes (Social Security and Medicare taxes). Using example one above, and assuming a 20 percent federal income tax bracket, the pastor would be subject to federal income taxes of \$2,000, plus SECA taxes of \$1,530, as well as any state income taxes.

Because the Affordable Care Act has converted the policy premium payments from pretax to after-tax funds for individual health insurance plans, the self-employed minister stands to lose forty or so percent of this benefit that was previously considered a fringe benefit, assuming state taxes are due.

While these rules are currently in place and effective, the conversations with Congress, the U.S. Department of Treasury, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the

Internal Revenue Service have continued as we have tried to eliminate this onerous burden created by the Affordable Care Act. However, those efforts have been unsuccessful, and in fact, the most recent guidance has made the impact of the Act even more challenging. The Internal Revenue Service continues to contend that the new procedure is necessary to prevent "double dipping" from a person receiving insurance premiums paid with pretax dollars and additionally the new "premium tax credit" available under the Affordable Care Act.

Therefore, the bottom line is that churches may no longer reimburse employees for, or directly pay, the cost of *individual* health insurance policy premiums with either pretax or after-tax dollars. If the church wants to assist a pastor or staff member in paying for their individual health insurance policy costs, the church may raise the person's salary, the church may not request or receive documentation of the premium costs, and the church must include such additional compensation in the employee's gross income. ■

Art Rhodes is president and CEO of the Church of God Benefits Board, Inc. You may contact the Benefits Board at (423) 478-7131; toll free at (877) 478-7190; or by email at info@benefitsboard.com. The Board of Trustees and the staff of the Benefits Board are not engaged in rendering financial advice, legal advice, or other financial planning services. If such advice is desired or required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.



BOOK REVIEW

Nellie Keasling



THE LAWS OF COMMUNITY:

The Handbook for Safeguarding the Family of God

DR. MICHAEL B. KNIGHT'S latest book is written to show "the biblical foundational laws to be observed in order to birth, build, and broaden Christ-centered and life-giving communal relationships." Dr. Knight is well qualified to write on this topic, since he has researched and read widely on the topic. He has also woven in his personal experiences to give the reader a valuable resource on relationships within a community. Knight's most important resource for this book, however, is his knowledge and use of the Word of God and what it says about the laws of community.

The book contains 13 chapters which discuss ten laws of community—unity, discipline, support and care, judging, humility, leadership, followership, speech, loyalty, and hospitality. Knight talks about the community being the family, the local church, and the worldwide family of God. Each chapter begins with a "Knowledge Box," which contains the law being discussed and the precepts which pertain to that law. Also within the chapters, Dr. Knight has provided wisdom points for the precepts.

Knight begins his book by pointing out that the law of unity is the foundation stone of the community; in fact, the word "unity" is part of the word "community." Then, he declares that "love is the protective gate for all that the

church is, does, has done, and hopes to do." Then, Knight points out the dangers, consequences, and ultimate end, if unity is not safeguarded. Therefore, unity must be maintained by all in the community.

Dr. Knight gives a similar treatment to the other laws of community. He bases his statements on the Scriptures, his personal experiences, and his research. In the law of humility, Knight says that it is the essential element for all church leadership and the virtue that will safeguard unity. So, as the book progresses, the reader sees the thread of unity being carefully woven throughout all the laws.

In Knight's conclusion, he points out how Christ commanded His followers to gather in the Upper Room in unity and community while in preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was this unity and power that enabled them to turn their "world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Knight leaves his readers to ponder a challenging question about how we will do the same in our own day and time.

The Laws of Community is a resource that should be on every minister's bookshelf. It is 372 pages full of challenging information. The ISBN number is 978-0-9834251-4-4, and the book sells for \$15.99. It may be purchased through Amazon or the Never Before Ministries at (270) 825-3513. ■

CHURCH OF GOD HIGHLIGHTS

News from around the denomination between September and December 2014

African Firewall Project Will Be Major Focus of 2015

Building a “Firewall” in Africa is a partnership of Church of God World Missions, the Department of Youth and Discipleship, and Men and Women of Action. It begins in Senegal, moves eastward to Niger, across to Ethiopia, then turns southward through Kenya to Mozambique. The Firewall Project’s purpose is to build key ministry centers for training and to spearhead evangelistic and discipleship thrusts along this demarcation line. These areas are hostile to the gospel.

The project has seven target zones that have been identified for the planting of new churches with each supported by sponsors and teams of trainers from the United States. Objectives of the Firewall Project will be achieved by a systematic, rapid, and saturating church-planting effort, undergirded by sustained, indigenous, multiplication of

churches and supervised discipleship training.

To learn more about the Africa Firewall project, visit www.africafirewall.com.

Lee University Enrollment Passes 5,000 for the First Time

Official fall 2014 enrollment at Lee University was 5,104, an all-time record and the first time Lee has registered more than five thousand students.

Approximately 79 percent of last year’s freshmen returned as sophomores to continue their degree programs. This was up by three percent over last year, according to officials. Over 700 students are taking online and onsite classes as part of the Division of Adult Learning this year. DAL classes are tailored for nontraditional students seeking to expand their education. The enrollment number also includes 351 graduate students studying in areas of business, counseling, education, music, and religion.



Vest Inaugurated Tenth President of Pentecostal Theological Seminary

Dr. R. Lamar Vest was inaugurated on October 23 as the tenth president of the Pentecostal Theological Seminary. The ceremony took place in the Cross Chapel on the



Church of God institution's campus.

Vest was selected by the PTS Board of Trustees in consultation with the International Executive Committee of the Church of God and

began his duties as president on August 1. Vest followed Dr. Steven J. Land who served as president from 2002–2014.

Previous presidents of the seminary have included Ray H. Hughes Sr., Robert White, J. Herbert Walker, Lewis Willis, and Donald M. Walker. Wade H. Horton was the first president, serving in an *ex-officio* capacity from 1974–1975 while general overseer of the Church of God.

Lee University 'Celebrates' Successful Campaign

Cleveland, Tenn.—Lee University commemorated the last four years of blessings and progress on the Cleveland, Tennessee, campus on Friday, September 19, when they hosted hundreds of guests, alumni, and community leaders for Celebration 2014.

A highlight of the event was the dedication of Lee's new Communication Arts Building,

the centerpiece of the five-year Find Us Faithful campaign. The Communication Arts Building sits prominently at the corner of Ocoee Street and Central Avenue and serves as the show-piece building of the Lee campus when emerging from downtown Cleveland.

Other projects of the \$25 million campaign included construction of a 300-seat Chapel, construction of the 126-bed New Hughes Hall, development of the ten-acre South campus area (the former six-acre First Baptist Church campus), and increasing endowed scholarships by \$2 million.

On Friday, September 19, a service of celebration included dedication of the new Communication Arts Building, a \$10 million, 41,000 square-foot structure that was completed in August, 2014.

On October 29, a dedicatory concert was held in Pangle Hall—the newly reconfigured sanctuary of the former First Baptist Church. The event was the culmination of Celebration 2014.

