

The Boldest Church in America

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The church I am privileged to pastor is the most courageous group of Christians I have ever met. Unquestionably, other bold “God Families” exist around the country, but it takes a unique kind of courage to leave behind the cherished visions of yesterday and pursue an uncertain call.

At eighty-five years of age, Westminster Community Church in Seattle faced some daunting challenges, yet the group responded by making some of the most remarkable changes imaginable. Time and again, I watched this bold church set aside their comfort to instead take hundreds of people to heaven who otherwise would not have had a chance to go. Here is our story...

A Bold History

Westminster Community Church was the first Assemblies of God (AG) church in Seattle, Washington. Established in 1923, a few hundred feet from the famous Fremont Troll, the church immediately began to flourish. It was only a matter of time before the founders outgrew their facilities. Not wanting to inhibit the growth that was occurring, they got a one-year permit and pounded together a make-shift barn at a major intersection in Ballard that would hold more people while they looked for a larger church site. I wonder, how many groups would have settled to simply stall their growth for a year until they found a bigger building? But that was not the way of our early founders.

Another interesting chapter in our history was when an earlier generation decided to hand-write the entire Bible. They enlisted help from people in the community, some who were not even Christians, to join with the church family and together write the entire Bible in longhand. This handwritten copy is actually on display at the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center in Springfield, Missouri. These early generations were original, innovative, and bold. Decade after decade revealed new chapters of success for the Westminster “God Family.” Ministries and facilities flourished and, over the years, hundreds of people were influenced for Christ.

However, in 2004, all that momentum came to a halt. It seemed as though from one month to the next the church fell off a cliff of some kind and began to sink into serious decline. The city’s urbanization inhibited the congregation’s natural ability to grow.

A Splinter in Our Soul

I still remember the night we named our cancer. Fifty of our leaders and spouses decided to meet together once a week to evaluate our spiritual situation. In one of those Tuesday evening discussions, the question was asked, “How would our neighbors know Jesus if He lived at the corner of 145th and Greenwood (our church address)? After pondering and surmising some answers, another question emerged, “How do our neighbors know us?” The contrast between those two sets of answers

was immediately disturbing. That question became a splinter in our soul that would not go away. In the ensuing weeks, that splinter drove us to call our cancer “consumer Christianity” and confess that we did not look very much like our Master. We further confessed that we had contented ourselves with character-based Christ-like-ness when, in fact, we were called to behavior-based Christ-like-ness. In those next few months, the core leadership of Westminster Community Church formed a viral new definition of Christianity. Somehow a spirit of courage welled up in us during those days, and we declared that we could no longer conceive of ourselves as “go-to-church Christians” but as “missionary Christians.” A bold transformation was underway.

The Formal Choice to Be a Turn-Around Church

Our soulish vision of Christianity was reforming, but our outward expressions of Christianity remained the same. The visible markers of our Christianity were still about praying over meals, having daily devotions, and going to church on Sundays. Most of us had long ago invited Christ to live inside of us, but we were altogether unskilled at letting Him out to impact others. On top of that, we did not know where to start, how to get our church engaged, or how to pay for the development of a new vision. So, following a Sunday morning worship service, we called a special business meeting to talk about the ambiguity of our challenge and to examine some options. That meeting turned out to be an epic moment for our church; we determined to do whatever it took to thrive again! In that moment, our congregation declared that we would now officially be a ‘turn-around’ church. We announced a season of “research and development” to test our way forward. The

group then authorized borrowing the necessary funds to help navigate to a new future. In one hour’s time, I watched a group align the church calendar and the church’s money to empower a “turn around” effort. That was a bold day!

In Search of a Viable Redemption Plan

We were now officially in search of a new redemption plan. The first step was obvious—the entire congregation needed to engage in the search. So, we canceled Wednesday evening Bible studies and established “Serve Night” so we could meet together and focus on redemption efforts. People began walking in the door with their sleeves rolled up, expecting to do something for the Great Commission. A sense of expectancy began to build. The new question that haunted us was, “How should we engage?” The splinter moved from our soul to our minds, and we had a problem to solve. It had been so long since our church had experienced redemptive flow that we forgot what it felt like. We studied together the redemption plans our AG fellowship had employed over the years; we faced the fact that the church growth plan of getting people saved on Sunday mornings no longer fit our situation. Something new was needed.

Over the next two years, we tested several redemptive ideas—and failed time and time again. Our first effort was to break everyone into serve teams, to have each team develop a plan to leave the building and serve our neighbors. That effort soon collapsed under the organizational weight it required. Then, we pulled everyone together into one large group to plan and execute a service event every twelve weeks. That approach soon collapsed for reasons still a mystery to me. Our next trial-and-error effort was to hold an off-site communion service in the Greenlake

neighborhood. We thought that because a communion-based service was deeply spiritual and different than the typical attraction-based service, it might call to people, but it did not! Although we learned a few things that would prove to be very helpful for our next test, we could see that its redemptive potential was limited.

At this point, we began to notice the “walking villages” that spring up in urbanizing areas of large cities and the unique communal social circles that form. We began to feel that a great opportunity for the gospel existed in these locations. Seldom are churches located in such places because land is too expensive. Also, most people who live in these areas do not like to drive, and many do not even own cars. Our long-held hope that people in these walking villages would one day develop a spiritual interest and drive to our church campus sixty blocks away was seriously misinformed. So, we began making plans to focus our next redemptive test on one of these walking village locations.

At the same time, we became intrigued by the way the New Testament churches gained influence in their neighborhoods. They simply met around food and talked about Jesus. In fact, the early communion services were actually dinners to which they invited the community, especially the poor, as seen most clearly in Paul’s famous communion address to the Corinthian church. It is arguable that in all of Scripture, the communion experience never occurred outside the context of a full meal. The meal was the perfect setting for the gospel to be nurtured and the stories about Christ to spread. Other Early Church Fathers, particularly Ignatius and Tertullian, continued the use of the fellowship meals as their primary method of evangelism.

In view of these scriptural and church history studies, the question began to emerge in our leadership circles, “Could the fellowship meals of the Early Church work again in urban Seattle?” So, we formulated a modern version of the fellowship meal, and in the summer of 2009 we launched a “Community Dinner” in the Greenwood walking village. From day one, this dinner-service surprised us. In fact, we were unprepared for the harvest God began pouring into our midst. During the next few months, I watched our church embrace the “missionary Christian” identity and boldly engage in a vision that could not be more different than our eighty-seven-year history. Now, two years later, we are serving Community Dinners in four other Seattle neighborhoods—most nights of the week. Finally, we have a redemption plan and we know how to use it!

The Day 14550 Westminster Way Went Dark

Our effectiveness in these neighborhood locations brought us to an interesting intersection. Ministry events still held on our church campus were continuing to decline while the events in our neighborhood sites were growing by 150 people every fifteen weeks. The contrast was too great to be ignored, so we met for another membership meeting to discuss it.

By the time the meeting concluded, we had chosen to leave behind our “retreat-site church” and become a fully invested “marketplace church.” This choice became visible in January 2010 when our church site went dark on Sundays for the first time since it was built in 1962. We moved our worship gathering to a community center fifteen blocks to the south. Following the worship services in the community center, we served a Community Brunch to those neighbors; in

a matter of weeks, another 150 friends began attending from that walking village.

At this point, we began to witness an interesting side-effect of the community dinners—our newfound friends began drifting over into our 10:30 a.m. worship gathering. It appeared an easy transition for them to attend a worship service that was held in the same gym where the food was served. This drift-over effect was as natural as could be, and it quickly became a foundational part of our redemption plan. Surprise! After five years of decline, our Sunday morning worship gatherings began growing again. In fact, attendance doubled within six months. We now had the ability to reach strangers on the sidewalks of Seattle and, in time, watch many of them join us to worship Christ together. Our redemption plan matured before our eyes into a fully-orbed church model. The sacrifices our church family had made were now bearing spiritual fruit.

And Then the Wrecking Ball

We now had the ability to predictably reach hundreds of people in Seattle, but we could not pay for it. Turn-around churches, like turn-around businesses, usually need bridge financing. Although bridge financing was part of our “turn-around” plans, it was time to build a sustainable budget to support our new marketplace calling. The deacons went to work considering the best way to use our land. Should we find a renter? Should we sell to another church? Should we sell to a

developer? These questions ultimately drove us to consider a plan that became perhaps our boldest step of all. Our church family voted to bulldoze our church building and replace it with affordable housing apartments on upper floors and church space on the bottom floors. After all, why should we spend thousands of dollars a month on buildings when we could make thousands of dollars each month and still have the same square footage for our use? Why should we own a retreat-site campus when we can turn it into a marketplace site? I watched the Westminster family come together and decide to invite hundreds of new friends to move in on top of our heads. *That was bold, bold, bold!*

Living to Breathe Favor

Westminster Community Church has become deeply affected by the Great Commission and now lives to breathe favor into many neighborhoods in our city. At every intersection, I watched our group set aside their comfort and choose to do what would allow more people to go to heaven—people who would otherwise not get a chance to go. Our group now walks a path where the challenges are huge, and the call for raw courage is constant. But, then again, Westminster is a church filled with “missionary Christians.”

May all my American Christian brothers and sisters have the opportunity to be flanked with as bold a group of Christians as I have been privileged to walk with.