Case Study

A Tale of Two Churches

Johnny Builderback looked out upon the congregation. His mouth joined in the chorus, but his mind wandered back over the events of the past few months. Surely the presence of the Lord was in this place. The relocation process had gone smoothly enough. The new worship center and educational space were as functional as they were beautiful. Best of all, the buildings were debt free.

“Now listen as the choir sings....” Jimmy will be a great addition to the staff, Johnny thought. He’s young, energetic, creative, talented. What I wouldn’t give to be 26 again.

It was only Jimmy Dapper’s second Sunday in the pulpit. His first Sunday was the last Sunday in the old church plant. Jimmy was a graduate of Belmont University where he’d studied music. He met Angie his sophomore year when they sang in the Belmont Reasons. They’d married three days after graduation. “No sense making the family make two trips,” Jimmy told Angie.

Jimmy served as the music associate at Two Rivers Church in Nashville before coming to Calvary as the Associate Pastor for Music and Youth. They didn’t have any children of their own, but they readily adopted the youth of the church.

He’s coming at a great time. He should help pull this congregation together. Just what the Great Physician ordered, Johnny thought. The choir was well into its anthem, but Johnny was thinking about his sermon. He’d worked hard on it this week. Last week he focused on the grief of letting go. Today he wanted to celebrate the joy of beginning again. As the anthem ended, Johnny rose to go to the pulpit, paused and made eye contact with several in the congregation before he began. A smile broke across his face. “Our God is the God of new beginnings.”

Ed Watts tried to listen closely to the pastor’s sermon. Still his mind wandered. Things seemed too good to be true. Ed Watts, 55, was the Associate Pastor for Education. He and Edna had been married for twenty-four years. They had two children. Faith, their older daughter, was only six weeks old when they adopted her. Now she was 19, and in her second year at JBU majoring in marketing. Hope, their second child, should have been named Surprise. She was born just sixteen months after they’d adopted Faith. Hope was a freshman at the community college with no idea what she wanted to study. Full of personality and charm with little interest in serious study, the Watts figured Hope would meet some fellow, get married and never finish her degree.

The last few years had been difficult professionally for Ed. Calvary was the only church he’d ever served. Ed was the vice-principal at a nearby high school when he sensed God calling him to vocational ministry. He attended
classes at the seminary extension program and completed his M.Ed. in four years. When Calvary called him twenty years before, it was a growing church located in the suburbs. It had grown from 155 in 1960 to an average Sunday School attendance of 845 in 1972. Then he watched as the city expanded, the community transitioned, and the church declined.

"Just as we celebrated our past last week, we are here today to dedicate ourselves to the future." The future. I wasn’t always sure Calvary was going to have a future, Ed thought.

Calvary begin in 1955 with ten families. Originally a mission of First Church, Calvary had help from the state convention and the local association along the way. Calvary grew rapidly. Within twenty-four months it constituted as a church. The church grew steadily from 1955 to 1972. Then the economy went sour. The gasoline crisis hurt the city. The community around Calvary was especially hurt because so many folks work in the nearby refineries. Interest rates soared. Layoffs and cutbacks were common. Many folks in the church had to default on their home loans. Property values dropped. The school district and local municipal utility district raised taxes to offset the declining property values. Folks began leaving for other communities. Many homes sat vacant for a long time. Mortgage companies practically gave the property away just to get the property off their books. It wasn’t long before the inner city moved out to embrace the community around the old church plant.

"At Calvary, our past has not been perfect, but our future is bright."

Our past has not been perfect. Now that’s an understatement. Ed’s thoughts trailed away from the sermon again.

Even with all that was happening around it, Calvary’s decline was slow at first. Though some families moved out of the area, they kept coming back to church at Calvary. There were two major crises that disrupted the church and initiated periods of serious decline.

Dr. Bill Wilson was perhaps the most popular pastor Calvary had ever known. He was the pastor during the late sixties and early seventies. Under his leadership the church experienced its greatest growth and undertook a major building program. They built a sanctuary that would hold 1,200 folks. Quite unexpectedly one Sunday morning, Dr. Wilson stood to preach and instead announced his resignation. The worn look on his face led some folks to assume it was the strain of leadership that led him to resign. Others said the deacons knew more than they were telling. It was a few months after Dr. Wilson resigned that the truth about his affair with his secretary leaked out.

Disheartened, folks started leaving the church.

Calvary had grown so rapidly and the future looked so bright under Dr. Wilson’s ministry, the church had gone heavily in debt to build their new worship center in 1972. Now with the unforeseen economic crisis and the declining attendance, the church experienced serious financial problems. There was serious conflict over how the church should deal with the financial situation.
Some thought they needed to cut back on staff. Others thought they should renegotiate the loan. Many voiced the opinion they never should have built the worship center in the first place. The finance committee recommended renegotiating the loan and dismissing two staff members. Drastic measures for drastic times seemed to be the mindset. Unfortunately, drastic measures in drastic times were also accompanied by drastic declines in attendance. Ed considered himself lucky to still have a job.

Ed really didn’t need to worry though. Most folks at Calvary considered him indispensable. Ed was quiet, well-organized, a plodder. He liked to work behind the scenes. During the crises, folks knew they could always count on Ed.

“When Moses died and Joshua assumed the responsibilities of leadership, the people grieved but God knew the best was yet to be. When David died and Solomon became king, the people grieved but God knew the best was yet to be. The people needed to let go of their celebrated past and embrace a future that was even brighter! When Jesus died, all was dark and dreary. But three days later, the stone rolled away and the disciples learned that with God the best is yet to be! With God the best is always yet to be.”

“I hope that’s true,” Ed thought. When Bill Wilson resigned, it would have been hard to think of the next few years as the best that was yet to be. Attendance fell off drastically. Giving dropped. The church went through three short pastorates and several staff changes. It was a highly unstable period. Eventually the church called Rob Johnson as pastor.

Johnson was Calvary’s pastor just before Johnny Builderback came. He was fifty-five when he came to Calvary in 1980. No one really expected much. Folks were surprised when things began to turn around. Even at 55, Builderback was still excited and energetic. He looked, acted and thought like someone much younger. Attendance even began to increase. Giving improved modestly. The community was racially mixed by this time, but the church was predominantly white, middle class. People in the community responded to Johnson’s effervescent spirit, upbeat preaching and contagious enthusiasm. Families of color began to join. Johnson was pleased. “This should be a community church, not a commuter church” he often said from the pulpit. Folks began to talk about Calvary as a community church.

Things looked bright for Calvary—until Rob Johnson suffered a series of heart attacks. The first two were light. Though the doctors warned Johnson to slow down. “Rob, you are overweight. You don’t exercise properly. You have a family history of heart problems. [His father died of a heart attack at 55.] And you put too much pressure on yourself at work.”

“I’d rather burn out than rust out, Doc!” Rob would say. Then he would slap Dr. Colson on the back, flash his famous face-covering grin and keep right on going. Eighteen months after the first heart attack he suffered a major arrest. He was hospitalized for three weeks and near the point of death for a while. The church came together and prayed for his recovery as they’d never prayed before.
Johnson survived, but he was never again the same. Not only was his physical energy greatly diminished, but it was obvious he struggled some with depression. His sermons lost their optimistic, visionary vigor. Folks hung on for a while, but little by little they began to leave the church. Attendance declined Johnson’s last three years as pastor.

Rev. Johnson took early retirement in 1988. During the last few months before he retired, Johnson met with church leaders and suggested the next pastor they call should help them relocate the church. “It’s Calvary’s only hope,” he told them. Most agreed.

Ed glanced around. It was obvious the congregation was enjoying the service. Johnny Builderback was a good preacher, not great, but certainly better than average. Builderback and Watts were about the same age. Watts was three years older than Builderback. Builderback came to Calvary in 1989.

From the beginning Builderback had been focused on relocation. When the search committee talked with him they shared their strong views of the need to relocate. From what Builderback could tell, it seemed like the right move. So shortly after he came to Calvary, he began talking about relocation.

Builderback asked Watts to do some research showing the need for and benefits of relocation. Once the report was prepared, Builderback moved aggressively to bring the matter to the deacons.

The deacons reviewed Watts report and discussed the matter of relocation in three consecutive monthly meetings. It was evident from the first meeting that the deacon body was not as committed to the idea of relocation as the search committee had led Builderback to believe. Those who wanted to move cited their reasons: where the church members lived (most lived outside the community), the poor use of space (buildings designed for 1,200 but only 300 regularly attended), worship center felt empty, insurance costs kept escalating because of the community, neighborhood racially mixed but the church was primarily Anglo. Others cited the church’s long history in that location, the need for a vital ministry in the inner city, and that many of the older members who still lived in the community would not have a church if Calvary moved to the suburbs. Besides, they asked, who would pay us what this property is worth?

The answer seemed to come from heaven. An official from ISD contacted the pastor after she learned the church might be interested in relocating. ISD wanted the property for a magnet school and would pay them the estimated price for their property. When Builderback presented ISD’s offer to the deacons, there was a general feeling that God was leading them to relocate. Though not all were convinced, the deacons voted to recommend the church sell the property.

When the matter went before the church, the congregation voted 65% to 35% to sell the property and relocate. Right after the vote was announced an elder statesman in the church, one who had voted for selling the property, stood
and said that 65% was not “a clear mandate from God” and he moved the church
send the matter back to the deacons. Though someone else spoke against the
motion saying that the majority should rule, the church decided to send the
matter back to the deacons for further consideration.

The deacons called a special meeting the following Sunday afternoon.
The meeting began at 4:00 and when it came time for Discipleship Training, the
daecos were still behind closed doors. The pastor emerged in time for the
worship service and, rather than preaching, asked the congregation to pray. “The
daecos are near a decision. If possible, I’d like for us to hear from them
tonight.” The congregation began singing a few hymns and was just beginning a
season of prayer when the deacons came into the sanctuary. The pastor
conferred with the chairman for just a minute, nodded and went to the platform.
Builderback recognized Dr. Colson, the deacon chairman. Dr. Colson
reported the deacons thought relocation was the right thing to do, but they
respected those who believed there was a need for a strong church in the
community. He made a light attempt at humor. “As the politician said, ‘Some
of my friends are for it. Some of my friends are ag’in it. And I’m for my
friends.’ I think that’s the way the deacons felt. Therefore, the deacons
recommend the church sell the property to ISD and relocate. Further, the
daecos recommend as soon as the church is established in its new location that
it start a mission in this area which will be an outpost for the gospel in the inner
city.” The recommendation met with a few amens and nods of approval.
The pastor then announced a special called business meeting in two
weeks to consider the deacon’s recommendation and asked the folks to pray for
God to give us a clear mandate. The church later passed that motion with 88%
voting in favor, 9% opposed and 3% abstaining.
The night the congregation approved the deacons’ recommendation,
Larry Lawrence escorted his wife Vicki to the pulpit. The Lawrences were long-
time members of the church. His voice had a sandpaper quality to it that
irritated some folks, but what he said brought genuine excitement to the
congregation. “Vicki and I have really prayed about this relocation. We’ve had
it in our hearts to help, but we needed to be sure this was the Lord’s doing and
not ours so we haven’t said anything to anyone except the preacher until tonight.
As some of you know, we are developing a new subdivision near Buena Vista
Lake. (Larry was a land developer.) It’s about fifteen miles from here. Most of
you know about where it is. Well, we’d like to give the church 10 acres to build
a new sanctuary and educational building. With the money we make from
selling the property we ought to be able to get into the new buildings debt free.”
The congregation rose in spontaneous ovation to the Lawrences’ generosity.
The general feeling was that God really had given them a clear mandate and a
certain sign. Only thirty-six months passed from the time Johnny Builderback
began his ministry until the church’s first Sunday in the new location.
“Let’s all stand and sing as the invitation is given.” That was a short sermon, Ed thought.

The mood was upbeat around the church office the next morning. No Monday morning blahs this week. Everything had gone well Sunday. The attendance was the highest it had been in years. Over 475 folks gathered for the morning service. Some were former members who wouldn’t be back, but many were visitors, young couples. There was already talk of adding another service in the near future. The weather was perfect for the dinner on the grounds. Things could not have gone better. It was like God smiled down on all they had done and said, It is good.

“Ed, everything was great. Greeters were in place. Guests felt welcomed. There were no hitches as far as I could tell. Everyone seemed to know what they were doing. And, Jimmy,” Johnny paused, “the music was great. I really like what you are doing with the music.”

Music and worship styles had been a sore spot at Calvary for a while. It began before the relocation when Builderback, his wife, Ann, and two key couples from the church attended a week-long seminar at Willow Creek. One of the laymen was Gene Jennings, the interim minister of music. One of the women, Mary White, chaired the music search committee.

The Willow Creek seminar focused on structuring the church to reach the unreached in the community. “Our purpose is to turn pagans into missionaries,” Bill Hybels said. “We structure everything we do around that purpose including our worship services.” As he described their seeker service, the lay couples from Calvary nodded. “That’s what we need at Calvary,” they discussed over a late-night cup of coffee.

Builderback liked much of the new music, but he was not convinced the church needed to make any significant shifts in strategy while the relocation project was going on. “I see the value, but I don’t think the timing is right,” was the pastor’s position. Gene Jennings, the interim minister of music, was insistent. “We’ve got to do something, pastor, to reach more people. Times are changing. You’re a good preacher and all, but folks are getting tired of the same old hymns. We at least need to try.”

Builderback wasn’t entirely convinced, but he said he’d let Jennings try. He had to. Jennings wasn’t the kind of fellow Builderback could say no to. He was strong-willed, had a deep voice which added authority to his words, and he had a quick temper. More than once he’d gotten upset with the pastor in a private meeting, raised his voice, stormed out of the room in anger and had to come back later to apologize. Though Builderback didn’t think much about it, Jennings was much like his father.
Builderback’s father was an alcoholic, but few folks outside of the family knew about it. An “impaired physician” might be the term used to describe Builderback’s dad today. Around the hospital and whenever he had surgery, Dr. John Builderback was as sober as a judge. He only drank at home. Most of the time things were civil, but then the weekend would come. If Builderback’s dad wasn’t on call, he would usually drink until he passed out on Friday night, sleep it off most of Saturday and repeat the process Saturday night. When he was sober, there was not a nicer guy than “Dr. John,” as the nursing staff called him, but when he was drunk he could be mean and abusive. Johnny loved his father, but he couldn’t stand to be around him when he was angry. Going to church was his great escape. He would spend the better part of every Sunday involved in church or youth activities just to get away from home.

When the couples returned to the city, Jennings introduced a few contemporary praise and worship choruses to the congregation. They met with mixed reviews at first, but gradually they became part of the worship style. Builderback was never sure if the church really liked the new music or they tolerated Jennings because they knew he was just an interim.

No one was really sure why, but a couple of younger families joined the church. Mary White, chair of the music search committee, attributed it to the new worship style. Buoyed by the “success” of the new worship style, she convinced the committee to call someone who could lead the church in a more contemporary worship style. When Mary White talked with Jimmy Dapper she told him Calvary needed a worship style that would reach the unreached. “It’s what the pastor wants and the church needs,” she said.

“I’m glad you like it pastor. I’d like to try a few other things if you don’t mind. I’d like to experiment with some different instruments, maybe a little orchestra, and some drama. We live in a highly visual society. Folks are accustomed to tv and the movies. If you’d let me know what you’re planning on preaching about in the coming weeks, I could try to develop something that will support your sermon.”

“Thanks, Jimmy, I’ll think about it,”

The parking lot was packed. It had been eight months since they moved into the new building. Attendance was up. New families visited every Sunday. They even went seven Sundays in a row where someone joined the church. Folks were talking about the possibility of adding another service or putting a balcony in the new auditorium.

Johnny Builderback looked out over the congregation. Jimmy was introducing a new chorus. The platform was getting a little crowded for the pastor. Jimmy’s “orchestra” turned into a little band, complete with drums. The music was upbeat and lively. Johnny had to admit, the younger families seemed
to like it. He liked some of it himself. The songs were unfamiliar at first, but he occasionally would find himself humming one of the choruses on Monday morning.

Music was one thing. Drama was another. Their first two attempts at drama were disasters. The skits were not well written and the acting was poor. Then Jimmy purchased some scripts from Willow Creek. The last drama was cleverly written and Builderback referred back to it during his sermon.

Quality wasn’t the real problem with the drama. Johnny didn’t like the way Jimmy got the drama started. The first drama was a surprise to the pastor. No, it was more than a surprise. He was shocked. The bulletin said “Message in Song ………………” *It Is Well With My Soul.* As soon as the soloist began to sing the chorus someone from the congregation stood up and challenged the words. “It may be well with your soul, but not with mine.” The soloist and the accompanists stopped. “My name is Job. I just lost everything and I’m not even sure God cares. I wish God were here. I’ve got a few questions I’d like to ask him.” Of course, it was all planned. Jimmy had warned the pastor not to be surprised if something unusual happened during the worship service. The twinkle in his eye let Johnny know something was up, but Jimmy never told him what. Jimmy had planned it to coincide with the pastor’s new sermon series on “Jesus Answers Questions from Job.”

Johnny covered his surprise well when he stood to preach, but the next day in staff meeting he was furious. The secretary couldn’t hear everything that was said, but there was no doubting the pastor let Jimmy have it. “Creative? It was a disaster,” Builderback said, his voice strained but controlled. “I told you I’d think about it and get back to you.”

“All you ever do is think about it,” she heard Jimmy say as he stormed out of the pastor’s office slamming the door as he went. The pastor came to the door, looked like he was going to say something else, then turned and closed his study door.

Ed emerged from the pastor’s study a few minutes later and told the secretary to hold the pastor’s calls for a while. If she needed him, he would be in Jimmy’s office.

Tension seemed to subside after that. Jimmy made sure he cleared everything with the pastor in advance. The pastor gave him a little more leeway in designing the worship services. There were no more overtly hostile staff meetings.

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In staff meeting the next morning, Ed Watts suggested they needed to begin planning for their first anniversary in the new facilities. “The way attendance is going we’d better make some plans to add space, start a new worship and Sunday School, or our growth is going to stall out. I know it’s
moving pretty fast, but the first anniversary would be a great time to announce
some plans for the future, even if it’s just the formation of a committee to help
us decide on the next step.”
“I think you are right, Ed, but I’d like us to talk about something else
first.” Builderback reached into his drawer and pulled out an envelope. He
opened the envelope and produced a petition signed by forty-three members of
the LLL Club (basically a senior adult social organization). As Jimmy perused
the petition Johnny said, “They don’t like the drums and all the choruses,
Jimmy. Some of them told me they have tried to talk to you, but you don’t listen
to them.”
“One person came to me, pastor,” Jimmy responded. “Mrs. Anderson.
She said she didn’t know some of the new songs, and the drums were loud, but
we’ve dampened the drums. Other comments I got were positive. Just look at
the younger families joining our church. I thought everything was okay.”
“Jimmy, these folks like you and they don’t want to hurt your feelings,
but they don’t like what you are doing with the music in the worship service. I
do, and I mean that, but lots of our folks just tolerate it.”
Johnny’s comment surprised Ed. He’d never been quite sure where the
pastor stood on the music in the worship services.
“Some of the folks are talking about leaving and going to other churches.
I’ve asked them to let us talk about it as a staff. Jimmy, if folks start leaving, we
won’t have a space problem.”
“If that’s what they need to do, I’m sorry. But we’ve got to think about
the lost.”
The pastor stiffened. Trying hard to keep his voice under control he said,
“Jimmy, that’s what you say every time I try to talk to you about music or drama
or anything else. I care about the lost, too, Jimmy, but I don’t see many lost
folks in the congregation. It’s mostly Christians.”
“And whose fault is that?” Jimmy responded.
Ed intervened. “Fellows, this is getting us nowhere.”

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For a pastor, it seems like every other day is Sunday. Either you are
planning for worship or leading it. When things are going well, it’s not so much
of a problem. It may be stressful, but it’s the kind of stress one likes to have.
When things aren’t going well, the burden of leadership can feel like heavy
pressure that rarely lets up.
As Johnny Builderback surveyed the congregation, his feelings were
mixed. Most of the younger families really enjoyed the new worship format.
Some would close their eyes as they sang praise to God. A few even raised their
hands. That caused quite a stir among some of the brethren at first.
“Good morning, Miss Peacock.” Johnny smiled as he remembered the startled look on her face the first time Sally Reinfeld raised her hands and said “Praise the Lord.” I thought she was going to swallow her upper plate when Sally did that. Miss Peacock thought the pastor was especially friendly this morning.

The older members seemed to tolerate the changes more than appreciate them. Nothing was ever said at business meetings, but Builderback could tell, especially since the petition, that there was growing discontent. Occasionally someone would complain about how many times they sang the same chorus or how loud the new band was. Though Jimmy had toned down the drums, there were so many musicians on the platform now, Johnny had to sit on the front pew before he preached.

No one had yet suggested they change back to the old way because things were going so well. Attendance continued to increase. They were approaching 550 in worship attendance and talking about adding a second worship service in the fall. Giving was up. The memory of declining attendance and financial problems were still in the minds of some of Calvary’s long-time members. No one wanted to return to those “old days.” “I’ll go along, but I don’t really like it,” was a popular sentiment.

The anniversary service was appropriately celebrative. So many new folks had joined the church that few people seemed to notice the significant number of families that had been present the year before that were no longer members of Calvary. Dr. Colson noticed . . . and it troubled him.

Jimmy Dapper couldn’t be at the budget planning meeting. The youth had a big rally planned before the homecoming ball game and he thought he needed to be there. After all, the staff had gone over the budget together and seemed in agreement on his requests.

Looking back now, Jimmy realized he’d made a major mistake by not being there. He didn’t know all that went on. The pastor and Ed gave him one story, but of the choir members who served on the committee gave him another. One thing was becoming increasingly clear to Jimmy: the pastor didn’t support him.

The committee seemed ready to approve the budget when Dr. Colson spoke up. Everybody knows he doesn’t like the changes in the worship service, Jimmy thought. Dr. Colson was a member of the LLL class. Though the Colson’s name didn’t appear on the petition, Jimmy thought he knew how Colson felt. His wife had certainly been vocal enough.
“I’m concerned about some of our older members. Pastor, they don’t like all the changes being made. They feel left out. I think you know some of them are talking about leaving. My wife told me the other day the Smiths and Thompsons are visiting Grace. The Bonners, Justices, and Wallaces have already gone. And these families have been some of our biggest givers through the years.

“If we keep losing folks like these, we won’t make this proposed budget. Those of us who’ve been part of Calvary for years know what that means. I think we need to keep our budget total the same as it is this year. I know our attendance is up, but that doesn’t mean the money is going to come in. These younger folks demand a lot and take a lot, but they don’t give very much.”

“Dr. Colson,” Johnny Builderback said, “I share your concerns about those who’ve left the church. No one likes to see friends leave. Me especially. I feel like I’m not doing something right.”

“It’s not your fault, preacher. It’s the music in the worship service. I’m not out to get Jimmy. I think he is a fine young man and he’s doing wonders with the youth. I just think we need to be more conservative with our money, that’s all.”

Betty Harris and a few others on the committee voiced similar opinions. “If you all feel that way, let’s see if we can’t make a few changes without hurting our overall program,” the pastor said.

A few changes … right, Jimmy thought. He decimated my music budget! But I’m sure that won’t hurt our overall program any. If there had been an Olympic event for sarcastic thinking, Jimmy would have been an medal contender.

“I recommend we keep the music budget the way it is this year,” Dr. Colson said. “Jimmy won’t be able to do all the new things he wants, but I think our youth are more important and I don’t want to cut the youth budget.”

He didn’t cut anything from the educational budget. Ed can get anything he wants. At least he didn’t cut my youth budget.

When the meeting was over, the committee had what most considered a realistic budget. The pastor and Ed were not entirely happy, but they agreed the proposed cuts would not hurt the overall program.

Jimmy didn’t see it that way. When Johnny and Ed told him about the meeting the next day, he just sat, stared and listened. He’d already been warned about what to expect the night before when the choir member from the committee called him after the game. Though Jimmy didn’t say anything, he knew this wasn’t going to be a long-term ministry. What I really want, is to be part of a church that’s interested in doing whatever it takes to reach the lost.

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Some of the younger families met at the Dapper’s house for a youth strategy meeting. In the eighteen months since Jimmy and Angie had come to Calvary, the church had grown considerably. Most of the couples gathered in the Dapper’s living room attributed much of the growth to Jimmy’s innovative worship approach and dynamic youth program.

As the meeting broke for refreshments, Dane Evans, one of Jimmy’s key youth leaders asked, “Jimmy, have you ever thought about being a pastor? I know your dad was a pastor and you may not want any part of it. But you are a creative, innovative leader. I think you are going to be stifled as long as you are at Calvary.”

“I agree,” Thomas Dawson said. “Dane and I had lunch the other day. We want to ask you to pray about something. When Calvary moved to Buena Vista the idea was to start a new work in the old neighborhood. So far as we know, nothing’s been done about that. We’ve talked with our wives and three other couples. All of us have agreed that we would like to be part of a new work, an innovative work, one that would focus on evangelism and reaching the lost. We don’t want to do traditional church.”

“That’s right,” Dane continued the conversation. “We’re not sure how to do it, but we think you are the one to lead us. Think of it, Jimmy. What a challenge!”

Dane didn’t need to say much more. Jimmy’s mind was racing ahead of them. It would be risky, but it would give him the freedom to do things the way he thought they ought to be done. Besides, he thought, the traditional church will soon be dead.

“It’s something to pray about, guys. I’ll mention it to Angie and we’ll see where the Lord leads.”

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After the staff meeting, Jimmy lingered in Johnny’s office. It was obvious he wanted to talk. “Something else we need to cover, Jimmy?”

“Do you mind if I shut the door?”

“No, go ahead. This must be important.”

“I think so. Pastor, for the last few weeks you’ve been preaching on ‘Faith: Tried and Triumphant’ and I realized my faith has never really been tested. That’s bothered me.”

“Tell me more, Jimmy.”

“Well, Angie and I have been talking. Things are going well here, but I’d like to try something different.”

Builderback bristled inside. “Different. Jimmy, I’m not sure we need to do anything different right now.”
“I’m not talking about doing anything different here. Do you remember what the church decided just before we came? About starting a new work in the old neighborhood? Well, Angie and I have been praying about that….”

Dr. Colson had recently been elected deacon chairman for the fourth time in five years. The by-laws said a man could serve two consecutive years, then had to rotate off for a year before being eligible for re-election.

The pastor and his wife invited the Colson’s to dinner. Dr. Colson could tell by the way Johnny insisted they get together that this was more than a social visit.

“I think this could be the answer to a lot of problems, pastor,” Dr. Colson said after Builderback explained what Jimmy wanted to do. “Let me make sure I have this straight. Jimmy wants to start a Bible study in the old neighborhood on Saturday nights in Claire Olson’s home with the idea of starting a new church. Eventually he would become the pastor. And he wants us to pay his salary for two years and the cost of renting a place for a year if they need it. Is that right?”

“That’s about it.”

Monday night deacons meetings can seem to go on forever, especially when there’s a good football game on that night. This time, though, things really had gone on late into the evening.

Pastor Builderback presented the proposal to the deacons. The proposal was met with mixed reactions. Though no one said it this way, some of the deacons thought it would be best if Jimmy left. The comments went like this: he’s done a good job, especially with the youth, but that band has got to go—it’s not Baptist; we can help him out a little bit, but two years is too much; thought he wanted to live by faith.

Others were hurt. They loved Jimmy. They loved the way he led worship. Their kids were active in his youth program and would be really hurt if he left. Again, though no one said it, they thought the pastor was forcing Jimmy out. It just wasn’t fair. Maybe the pastor ought to go, not Jimmy.

After lengthy debate Dr. Colson said, “Here’s the amended motion.” His heavy sigh before he summarized the motion indicated the level of tension in the room. “The deacons will recommend to the church that Jimmy Dapper continue as associate pastor for music/youth for six months. During that time he will be free to start a Bible study in the old neighborhood on Saturday nights. At the end of six months he will be free to work full-time on the new church. We will continue to pay his full salary and benefits for the next six months. Then for the
next six months his salary will be cut by one third, then cut an additional third for the next six months. That ought to give him a good start. Any questions?"

“What about rent on the building? I think we ought to do what he asked, especially since he’s not getting two full years of salary.” James Cox amended the motion to include the first year’s rental for the new church.

The amended motion passed.

It was unexpectedly chilly outside. A light dusting of snow fell in the afternoon, not enough to disrupt traffic or force anyone to stay home. It was just enough to let folks know winter had come.

Claire Olson’s living room was toasty warm. A blazing fire and a cup of steaming hot chocolate greeted those who’d come for the first Bible study in the old neighborhood.

Jimmy looked around the room at Claire Olson and the five couples that had joined him and Angie. Their faces and conversations testified to the eagerness and excitement they felt being here. It’s good to see these folks enjoying themselves so much, Jimmy thought.

Jimmy nodded and Dane and Thomas got out their guitars and starting playing. Sarah Dawson began singing along and soon everyone joined in the praise and worship. Angie suggested they pray and really give themselves to God. Some got on their knees. A few couples held hands. Almost without direction they began to pray, first one, then another. After Jimmy prayed, they focused their attention on him.

“I’ve thought a lot about our first meeting and what we would study together. At first, I thought about a study of Exodus and Joshua, about the way God led the Hebrew children from bondage into the Promised Land. This neighborhood may not look like much, but I think it is our promised land and there are Jerichos, strongholds, out there that need to be brought down.”

“Amen to that,” Joyce Evans, Dane’s wife, said.

Amen, indeed. The community around Claire Olson’s house was nothing like it was when she and Ollie, her deceased husband, moved in forty years before. Then, it was a quiet, middle class, Anglo community outside the city. A demographic study Jimmy got from the association office painted a different picture.

The community was racially mixed: 45% Anglo, 25% African American, 15% Hispanic, and 15% Asian.

There were some folks, like Claire, that had lived here most of their lives. About 14% of the folks were 55+ years and long-time residents of the area. Most all of these were Anglos. A few were still members of Calvary.

Most of the residents, though, were under 35. There was a big gap in the 35 to 55 age bracket. Nearby Encarta University had turned parts of the
neighborhood into a residence area for college students. Some of the older
residents had turned their two story homes into little apartment units by renting
out rooms in their homes to college students.

The Veranda Corporation recently purchased an entire block and had
almost completed sixteen upscale townhouses. Though not yet complete,
several of the units had already been sold, mostly to young professionals.

Most folks over 18 had completed high school. Many had college
degrees, but were not yet established in their chosen fields or professions.

A survey Jimmy and his group conducted before beginning the Bible
study suggested area residents had little or no church background, were
unfamiliar with church traditions, and thought the Bible was a good book on par
with the Koran and other great religious documents. Of those who did have
some religious background, Roman Catholic was the most common. There was
a growing Islamic movement in the community, however.

Jimmy smiled. “But the more I prayed and thought about it, the more I
felt God leading me to a study of the book of Acts. I think the early church’s
struggle to get started, to establish itself in a hostile community, to bring the
hope in the gospel to people who were looking for it and didn’t even know, I
think that’s going to be our struggle. So open your Bible to Acts 1 and let’s
begin.”

Jimmy was a strong Bible teacher. Some folks would say he had learned
from a master Bible teacher, his father. For as long as he could remember,
Jimmy felt God wanted him in the ministry. But he had doubts about being a
preacher. Though he loved his dad, he knew couldn’t measure up to the
standard set by his father.

Jimmy’s first experience preaching was painful. After preaching the
Sunday morning sermon during youth week, he waited for his dad to say
something. The family completed lunch with his dad talking about everything
except Jimmy’s sermon. Somehow, Jimmy knew his dad was not pleased. Later
that afternoon Jimmy overhead his father tell his mother he would have thought,
after listening to all his sermons, that Jimmy would have done a better job and
not just rambled on like that. “Maybe he’s not called to preach.”

He may not have been a great preacher, but Jimmy could sing! So he
assumed God wanted him in music. That’s one reason Jimmy never went to
seminary. He thought he’d learned what he needed to know about music
ministry in college.

So Jimmy was surprised at how well folks responded to his teaching.
His dad tried to help by offering some resources on Acts, but Jimmy decided he
would read the Scripture, see where God led him to apply it to his situation, and
go from there.
The Bible study group was growing. It didn’t take long before additional couples joined them. Most came from Calvary, but two couples joined them from the community. One couple was African American. Within five months more than thirty folks crowded into Claire’s living room every Saturday night. All the adults were in their 20’s and 30’s. Some had small children they left with babysitters while they attended the Bible study. A genuine sense of community developed among the folks.

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“We’ve only got a few weeks left and I’ll be doing this full time” Jimmy told Angie. “I know it was a risk, but I think I’m going to like it.”

“Jimmy,” Angie asked, “what are we going to do next?” Angie, she was ever the practical one in the family. Jimmy had dreams about a church that was evangelistically oriented, that ministered to the community, that worshipped in a non-traditional way. But he’d never been in a position where he had to establish the structure of the program. It had always been there for him. Usually his job was to expand it. Now he was starting from scratch. He had to build the structure, and, frankly, he didn’t know how to do it.

“I was talking with Dane and Thomas the other day. Dane has a friend, a business consultant who teaches part-time at Encarta. They suggested I talk with him.”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, Jimmy, but I think that would be a good idea.”

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Terry Harrington had known Dane Evans since high school. They’d gone to college together at Jefferson University. Terry majored in business; Dane in pre-law. Graduate school had taken them in different directions, but business opportunities brought them both to the city. Terry was a consultant with R.A.M. Dane had worked in the District Attorney’s office for a while before starting his own law practice. Every week they would get together for a competitive game of racquetball. When Terry’s wife left him, Dane and Joyce were there to help him through it.

Dane had consistently invited Terry to attend the Bible study at Claire’s house, but Terry always had an excuse. When Dane asked him to consult with Jimmy, though, Terry couldn’t refuse, not after all Dane had done for him.

Dane, Terry and Jimmy met for coffee at Starbucks on Thursday afternoon. Jimmy told him about his dream of being part of a non-traditional church where people really understood what it meant to be Christians and minister to others. Terry had never met anyone with as much passion as Jimmy. His idea of Christians was limited to a few television evangelists and Dane.
Dane was different, but he didn’t have a high opinion of Christianity. So he was surprised to hear the words come out of his mouth, “Well, Jimmy, I’ll be glad to help, but to really know what you guys are about I’ll probably need to come to one or two of your Saturday night meetings.”

Dane hid his smile.

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Jimmy continued to serve on staff at Calvary while the new work developed, but tension between him and the pastor was never resolved. A few weeks before Dapper terminated with Calvary the pastor said he understood a number of families from Calvary had joined Jimmy’s Bible study. Though the pastor never said it, Jimmy thought he’d accused him of proselytizing, of targeting key families and getting them to leave Calvary and join him. Though he never talked much about it, Jimmy resented Johnny Builderback. Once, in a conversation with Dane and Thomas, he described Builderback as a man with no vision, a poor leader, and predicted Calvary would never reach its potential until it had another pastor.

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“Look, Jimmy, if you guys were a business I’d know what to tell you, but I don’t know how this is going to fit your paradigm.”

“You’ve already lost me, Terry.”

“A paradigm is a frame of reference, a way of looking at things. You Christians look at things one way. I’m a businessman. I look at things differently. You talk about faith. I look at the facts. We just don’t see things the same way.”

“Terry, there is some truth to what you’ve said. I’m sure I do see things differently than you. But there are several key facts that are important to me and, whether you’ve thought about it or not, faith is important to you.”

Jimmy and Terry had made it a practice of gathering at Starbucks for the last few weeks. Terry had been a tremendous help to Jimmy. He’d helped Jimmy take care of the necessary paperwork to incorporate with the state. But Jimmy had balked at the idea of developing a business plan for the church.

“Look, Jimmy, if you really believe what you say, you are in the most important business in the world. Why shouldn’t you know who your customer is and figure out ways to get the product to them? If you were one of my clients, I would insist on a mission and vision statement. Then we would work on goals and action plans.”

Reading Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Church had given Jimmy a more positive attitude toward what Terry was suggesting. The more he thought about
it, the more sense it made. Vision, goals, action plans, it sure sounded secular, 
but maybe it would work.

“Claire, thank you for opening your home to us. We couldn’t have 
gotten started without your help. But, folks, it’s really getting too crowded in 
here. So I have arranged for us to meet in the auditorium of the old Calvary 
church next Saturday night. ISD has agreed to let us meet there for six months.”
The forty-seven folks that crowded into Claire Olson’s living room taxed 
the air conditioner to the max. But it had been exciting to watch the group grow.
Jimmy suggested they call themselves Renewal of Hope. It seemed the 
right name for their group. They were a church, but they didn’t want the words 
Baptist or church in their name to stand in the way of folks meeting with them. 
Some of the members back at Calvary hadn’t been too happy about that, but 
Jimmy had been clear and forceful. They wanted to remove as many barriers as 
possible to folks coming to faith in Christ.

“After our Bible study and worship time, I’d like for us to stay and talk 
about our future as a church. Terry has convinced me we need a mission 
statement and some goals. I’ve thought about it and it seems to me our mission 
has been carrying out the great commission in the spirit of the great 
commandment to love one another. We’ve all been involved in informal 
discussions, but next week we need to talk about how we are going to carry this 
out.”

Someone had forgotten to tell the maintenance people to turn the air 
conditioner on. So all throughout the worship time the auditorium had been 
almost unbearably stuffy. But things were beginning to cool down. 
Folks had enjoyed the potluck supper. Some left because the heat was 
too much on their kids. Others said they needed to relieve the babysitter. Jimmy 
was disappointed everyone didn’t stay, but all in all this was a good group. 
Terry divided everyone into four dialogue groups. Their assignment, he 
said, was to talk about what they thought it meant to carry out the great 
commission is the spirit of the great commandment in this community. 
After thirty minutes, Jimmy called everyone back together. “Well, what 
do you think? Who’ll be first?”
Hal and Anne Hendricks were one of the first folks to join the Bible 
study after they started meeting in Claire’s house. Hal had come from a Baptist 
background. Anne came from an Assembly of God background. He was never 
happy in an Assembly of God church. She felt stifled in Baptist churches, but 
they’d found Renewal of Hope to be a place where both felt comfortable.
“This may not be what you are looking for, but we’re not sure about the idea of a business plan. To us it seems like the world’s way of doing things. No offense, Terry, but we think we just need to be sensitive to the Lord. He will lead us like he led the Hebrews out of Egypt into the Promised Land. We don’t need a business plan. What we need is a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.”

“Okay, Hal,” Terry said, “let’s talk about that.”

There was general agreement that having a business plan seemed secular, “but God had a plan for man from the beginning” someone suggested.

Turning to their consultant, Jimmy said, “There is one thing, Terry, that I really agree with. This shouldn’t just be something we sit down and dream up ourselves. We really do need the Lord’s leadership. It may not be a pillar or a cloud, but if we aren’t following God’s plan, our own won’t succeed.”

There was something about that comment that troubled Terry. In some ways, it seemed like they were avoiding dealing with reality. On the other hand, he thought, they really take God’s leadership seriously. I have to admire them for that.

Terry responded, “Then you guys need to pray about this. We weren’t going to make any plans tonight anyway. But I would like to hear from the other groups.” That seemed right. One by one the groups shared what they had discussed.

They talked about using spiritual gifts to develop ministries. “Every member a minister” was suggested as a slogan.

“We could survey the community, find out what’s needed and see if God’s given us someone with a spiritual gift that could meet that need.”

“Our group thinks we need to focus on evangelism if we are going to be a great commission church.”

“We really like our small groups. And we are getting so big. I’m afraid we are going to lose a lot of the intimacy we’ve got right now. We wondered if there was a way we could still meet in homes or at least keep our small groups. We are afraid if we just meet here we are just going to become another traditional church.”

“One other thing, we think we need elders or someone to help you, Jimmy.”

As the groups talked, Terry listed their ideas on a whiteboard.

The meeting went late into the night. Folks were tired but energized. It was going to be nice not getting up tomorrow morning for church.

The alarm clock was going off. Instinctively Jimmy hit the alarm clock, but the noise wouldn’t quit. That’s when he realized it was the phone. What time is it? The red integers on the clock said it was 1:04. I hope mom’s okay.
Even as he reached to pick up the phone, Jimmy remembered his mother’s recent mild stroke. Nothing to worry about the doctors said, but when it’s family it’s hard not to worry.

“Hello.”

“Jimmy, sorry to bother you so late at night.” It was Dane.

Momentarily relieved, Jimmy said, “No bother. What’s up?”

“Terry and I talked for a long time after the meeting tonight. We talked some about the meeting, but eventually I asked him if any of this had changed the way he thought about God. He said he’d gotten curious and started reading the gospel of John I’d given him. You’re not going to believe this, but he asked me what it meant to be born again. I told him and he just prayed to receive Christ. I told him he needed to share this with someone. He wanted you to be the first person he told. Here, I’ll put him on.”

“Jimmy!”

The meeting had been announced well in advance. Everyone’s interest was piqued. Jimmy and Angie, Dane and Joyce Evans, and Thomas and Sarah Dawson had taken the ideas the folks suggested in the Saturday night meetings. Together with Terry they had developed a “ministry plan” (Thomas thought that sounded better than a business plan). Now they were ready to share their plan with the others.

“Angie is passing out some information sheets. I’d like for us to take a few minutes to go over them together after we’ve spent some time in prayer,” Jimmy began.

“The list looks good. I want to commend all of you for your hard work,” Herb Miller said. Herb and his wife Gloria and their son, Rees, had been with Jimmy from the beginning. Herb and his wife were third generation Baptists. Rees was one of the first youth to make a profession of faith after Jimmy came to Calvary.

“But I’ve got a couple of unanswered questions that we haven’t addressed. Perhaps you can help me. First, I’m still not sure who we are as a church. This sheet gives us some action plans, but it doesn’t really tell me who ROH is. Are we going to be part of the association? If we are a church, I know what a traditional church looks like, but I’m still not sure how we are going to be a church.

“Second, and this may be just a continuation of my first question, I’m not sure how we are structured. We are members of ROH, I guess, since we’ve been with you from the beginning. But is anyone who starts coming and a Christian considered a member? Or do we even have membership.
“And another thing, Jimmy, maybe this is a third question, you’re doing a great job, but you can’t do this all by yourself. Are we going to have other staff members, or deacons, or elders, or what?”

“Those are good questions, Herb.” Oh, great, a male version of Angie! We’re talking ministry and he wants to talk about how we organize. “We’ve talked some about those things, but we don’t have any answers yet. Other questions?”

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Worship was a great experience when the ROH family gathered together. They’d decided to meet in small groups for Bible study on Wednesday nights and worship together as a community on Saturday nights. The Saturday night group had grown to about 145. More and more of the folks came from the community. Sometimes it looked like a little bit of heaven to Jimmy. Though they were still predominantly Anglo, there was an American-born Chinese couple, the Chens, that worshipped with them and took an active role in one of the small groups. Three Hispanic families participated in worship though they hadn’t become part of a small group yet. The Youngs, their first African American couple, had gotten some of their friends to join them.

Jimmy was surprised to see Johnny Builderback come in the back and sit by the Millers. I wonder why he’s here?

Jimmy’s got his band again. Builderback smiled at that thought. Looks like he’s doing a good job. I wouldn’t have expected anything less from him. He’s got a lot of talent to go with his charisma. There are the Andersons. I thought they must be coming here. I wish I knew more of these songs. No, what I really wish is we could sing more of these songs at Calvary. That thought surprises me. Maybe I ought to bring Dr. Colson and a few of the deacons down here, let ’em see what we are getting for our rental money. Wouldn’t that be something? Most folks at Calvary would have a fit if they saw all these folks clapping and waving their hands. Imagine that. Folks just stand up and read Scripture. Seems pretty disorganized, but it seems to work for them.

The band stopped. Jimmy stood up. “Now it’s time to hear from our small group leaders.”

One by one, small group leaders gave reports on what was happening in their groups. Not all of them reported every week, but each of them had the opportunity. Some talked about answered prayers. One leader introduced Cynthia and her boyfriend who prayed to receive Christ that week.

Most of the groups were doing well. Six of the eight had grown. Two of the groups had developed problems. Jimmy had learned to expect that. The good thing about the cells is that folks feel cared for. Most of the cells had done a good job of including unbelievers. In the seven months since they expanded and started additional cells, nine people had been baptized and four more were
waiting. *Nine, plus four, plus Cynthia and her boyfriend. I’ll bet that’s more than Calvary’s baptized this year.*

Jimmy had resisted developing a standard curriculum for the cells even though it was one of their action plans. He thought the cell group leaders needed to be free to follow the Lord’s leading as they saw fit. But some folks would switch groups depending on the topic. That caused problems, so they went ahead and standardized the material somewhat. It seemed to be working.

The thing that was giving Jimmy the hardest time was deciding on a structure. Terry said they needed a CEO, but Jimmy didn’t like that model. It may have worked for his father, but he didn’t like the way it worked at Calvary. Besides, he could never see himself as a CEO. The elder concept looked more appealing, but they hadn’t decided how to work that out yet. *Give us time.*

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After the service Johnny Builderback sought Jimmy out. “Jimmy, looks like things are going well. I’m pleased.”

*I’ll bet you are.* “Thanks, pastor.”

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**Renewal of Hope—A Christian Community**  
**A Ministry Plan**

**Vision:** To carry out the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment.

**Priorities**  
To maintain Christian community.  
To reach the unreached.  
To help believers become fully mature followers of Christ.

**Action plans for maintaining Christian community:**  
Meet together weekly in small groups.  
Develop community leaders.  
Develop a coordinated curriculum to use in community groups.

**Action plans for reaching the unreached:**  
Encourage ROHers to develop relationships with unbelievers.  
Encourage each community to include unbelievers.  
Do a survey of the spiritual gifts of ROH members.  
Survey the community.  
Help members develop spiritual gifts and ministries to use them evangelistically.

**Action plans for helping unbelievers become fully mature followers of Christ:**  
Develop a standard of accountability that ………..