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INTRODUCTION

A CHURCH ABOUT TO DIE

One day I received a phone call that changed my life. In fact, it changed millions of lives. At the time I was the pastor of a church in Downey, California. Before I arrived as pastor, the congregation had suffered greatly. Bitter disunity among the members had led to a three-way split. I was called to lead the remnant. During the next five years, the church experienced healing and restoration of its members, a renewed vibrancy in its worship, and an increased ministry to the community. The church people were spiritually healthy once again, and I loved them dearly.

Before I was called to the church in Downey, I served as the pastor of a struggling church in San Pablo, in the Bay Area of San Francisco. It was my first pastorate. The church was located in a crime-riddled, broken community. I performed scores of funerals. Yet I also saw God change numerous lives and heal many broken marriages. The local police even credited our church with contributing to a drop in the area's crime rate.

Having served fewer than ten years as a pastor, I had already witnessed God's gracious hand working mightily in two unique local churches. But this phone call would take my walk with God, as well as my experience in church, to entirely new biblical proportions.

During that phone conversation, I learned of Faith Baptist Church. It was dying. The ten remaining

members had placed a “For Sale” sign on the property and were grimly preparing to disband. They needed a miracle to survive, let alone thrive. Sadly, miracles seemed in short supply over its turbulent history.

The church was located over 1,700 miles away from Downey, in the agricultural community of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Its population of 120,000 seemed miniscule compared to the teeming masses in the metro Los Angeles area where I then lived. The winters in Saskatoon were brutal, with temperatures dipping lower than forty degrees below zero.

The church had begun in the 1920s as an outreach of a women’s mission society. Occasional successes marked its history. However, every time the church took a step forward it invariably experienced conflict, weak leadership, and unwise congregational decisions. After years of disappointment and decline, the church had lost any sense of its original missionary zeal.

Several factors conspired together to condemn the small congregation to obscurity. The church was buried deep within a residential neighborhood making it difficult to find for even the best-intentioned visitor. There was almost no parking space. The building was in pitiful disrepair. The roof hanging over the front entrance sagged so severely that the front door could only be fully opened after someone heaved himself enthusiastically against it. The box-shaped structure was walled in stucco and painted a dreary off-white. Every spring, water from melting snow would seep into the basement, invading the Sunday School rooms and leaving stains

and mold wherever it crept. The antiquated tile floor in the auditorium coupled with cheap metal chairs for the congregation contributed to a noisy, uncomfortable, less-than-worshipful experience. The meager offerings were insufficient to cover even general maintenance of the aging facility, let alone sorely-needed renovations.

Ultimately, the congregation had dwindled to fewer than a dozen members. Unable to offer even a token salary, they had been unable to enlist a pastor. Now, with resources exhausted and the people disheartened, disbandment seemed the only remaining option. It appeared that this little congregation would soon become the next in a succession of churches across North America to permanently close its doors.

That's when God brought the church to my attention. My wife, Marilyn, and I agreed to pray. As we did, God convinced us that He wanted to restore that church. I decided to visit Saskatoon. God began to reveal to me His perspective. Here was a determined little group of people who tenaciously believed that God still had a purpose for their congregation. God showed me an extensive province, almost the size of Texas, with town after town having no apparent Gospel witness. He reminded me that the churches in Canada were declining. When God revealed to me what was on His heart, it took my breath away.

It made no sense for me to leave California and relocate to Saskatoon. I had four sons under nine years old, with a daughter still to come. I had to think about

their future. I also served in the second-largest city in North America. Clearly that was a strategic place to invest my life. My current church had experienced many difficulties, but it was now healthy and I was blessed with many strong, supportive, congregational leaders. The members had recently voted to give me a raise in salary as well as a healthy book allowance, a trip to Israel, and time to work on a doctor's degree. Clearly God was using me where I was. On the contrary, the future of the church in Saskatchewan seemed much in doubt. I had friends and fellow pastors insist I would be wasting my life and condemning my ministry to irrelevance if I left my thriving California congregation and migrated to a small, isolated community on the Canadian prairies. But that was not the way God viewed it.

Prayer can be unsettling, because God uses our conversations with Him to change us. As Marilyn and I prayed, God laid His heart over ours. Somehow, through the divinely mysterious workings of prayer, we grasped the breathtaking love God had for a tiny, impoverished congregation. Christ died for that church. We knew we must go. Moving to Saskatoon was not an expression of our dedication, missionary heart, or heroism. It was our response to a God who absolutely refused to allow a little congregation to die.

What follows in this book is an account of what God did. Anyone who was there knows it was God. And anyone who shared in our experience believes God could do it again. Your church may be experiencing great difficulty or considering closing. If so, please read these pages

carefully, with your spiritual senses open to what God may say to you. I pray He will lay His heart over yours and grant you a spectacular view of what He intends for your church.