



ABUNDANT LIFE CHURCH Sarasota, Florida

BY RICK BEACHY

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Reflections on God's Work - Part 1

God is at work. In 2023, the *Beacon* feature articles will seek to capture a snapshot of the ways God is working in churches across our conference. We pray that these articles encourage your faith and spur you on to join God in the work he is doing in your local congregation.

~Kelsey Jurkovich, Publication & Literature Committee

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no man, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19-23 NIV)

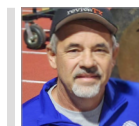
Paul's life was about winning as many people to Jesus as possible. He tells us that he tried to relate to people where they were, to be able to take them to where God wanted them to be. We try to do the same thing at Abundant Life. Our goal is to make an impact on our community and give as many people as possible a chance to come to know Jesus. One way we do that is through our annual Spring Carnivals and Fall Festivals.

We open up our campus to the community every spring and fall and invite them to come and have a fun family time with games, activities, and plenty of free food. On October 30th, between 1,500 and 1,700 people came to our campus—where the kids played in bounce houses, rode a mechanical bull, climbed a rock wall, made crafts items, and walked through the Trunk-or-Treat area to fill up on candy. Three food trucks, as well as food made by church volunteers, fed the people that attended. Christian music played in the background and announcements were made throughout the time, welcoming people to the event as well as to our church services. We had a prayer area set up where numerous people came for prayer, received a copy of the *Jesus* film, and had a chance to hear the gospel message. One lucky attendee went home with

a free TV! We do the drawing as a way to get their contact information so we can thank them for coming and invite them to come back. We have a number of families at Abundant Life whose first interaction with us was at one of our events.

In 2021, our Fall Festival landed on Halloween and we were overwhelmed by the response as over 2,000 people attended. We were much better prepared this year and had an awesome time with the people of our community. We realize that most of the people who came will never attend a service at Abundant Life, and that's ok. Jesus has called us to scatter seed. In his parable about the sower only 25% of the seed scattered produced a harvest. Does that mean the seed that didn't produce a harvest was wasted? No! That seed might produce a harvest next year, in five years, or in twenty years. Our job is to scatter the seed and trust God to bring the harvest. Recently, I had the privilege to share the gospel and see a young man come to Christ. Our conversation wasn't his first interaction with the gospel. Seed had been planted in his life many times; it had been watered at other times. I just happened to be there when it produced fruit. But it wouldn't have produced fruit without the previous interactions. Our community parties are places to scatter seed and then see what awesome things God will do.

Abundant Life Church and Ministries was started in 1999 by Vernon Zook and a core group that is still part of the church. They moved to the current location in 2007 and are in the process of adding a new worship center and multipurpose lobby.



Rick is a CMC minister, serving as care pastor at Abundant Life since 2004. He and Connie served nine years with Rosedale International (then RMM) as church planters in Ciudad Juarez. They have four adult children and four grandchildren.



God's Masterpiece

BY CALEB REED



Table of Grace, Mechanicsburg OH- Pastor, Paul Kurtz

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (NLT). When I read this, I picture God taking his time to put me together, putting exactly what I need inside of me to accomplish the good things that he has planned for me.

Also, as I read this verse, the burden inside of me grows for those around me who haven't yet discovered that they are God's masterpieces. The world around us is broken, and people (family, friends, and neighbors) are hopelessly searching to find who they are. We, the church, have a unique opportunity to point people to Jesus and help them discover this.

I want to see churches of all shapes and sizes meeting in homes, coffee shops, and traditional spaces.

Over the last several months, CMC's Mature & Multiply newsletter has been highlighting leaders who are engaging the community around them. They are helping people discover they are God's masterpieces. These stories have resulted in new church plants, people being led to Christ who are now first-generation Christians, and Bible studies being hosted in homes with brand-new believers. As we sit and talk with these leaders, I walk away encouraged and challenged. They are passionate about sharing the gospel; this is evident through the work they are doing.

Our hope is that these stories will inspire you to think of ways you can engage the community around you. This is how we will see a movement take place; this is how we will see lives transformed and new churches started. Imagine if you started a Bible study in your home, inviting those who might feel intimidated by walking into a local church building. What if that Bible study outgrew your living room, and you had to begin looking for a larger space to meet? Maybe you could start by hosting a neighborhood meal once a week in your home, inviting neighbors that don't have a relationship with Jesus. This could very easily turn into a church gathering. What if you spend time in a local coffee shop once a week, specifically

asking people how you can pray for them? This could lead to life transformation and people discovering they are God's masterpieces.

As CMC's church planting catalyst, my desire is to see a movement of new churches started in your neighborhood, city, and beyond. I want to see churches of all shapes and sizes meeting in homes, coffee shops, and traditional spaces—churches that meet people where they are and introduce them to the transforming power of the gospel.

As part of this movement, we are excited to announce that this month, we will be launching the first-ever Mature & Multiply Podcast. We will continue to highlight extraordinary stories from ordinary people who are regularly engaging their community. This will give you the opportunity to hear the passion and the heart in the voices of those we interview.

Another way to engage this movement is by a weekly prayer meeting that is focused on church planting. A group meets every Thursday morning from 9:00-9:30 to lift up those who are actively planting churches and to discern how the Lord is leading the Church Plant Team. To join us, email me at caleb@cmcrosedale.org to receive the Zoom link and more details.



Church plant in Utica, NY- Pastor, Nate Olmstead



Caleb serves as the church planting catalyst for CMC. He loves a quality cup of coffee and spending time with his family. Caleb and his wife, Stephanie, and their two children live in Resaca, Ohio.



Thinking About Church

BY JEREMY MILLER



This or That? Part 1

Change was in the air.

I came to Rosedale Bible College (RBC) from Hutchinson, Kansas, in 2000. As my 18-year-old-self encountered “modern” worship music, it quickly became apparent that this was the antidote to the deep boredom of old hymns and stale faith! I became convinced that hymns don’t grow churches, don’t cause us to feel intimacy with Jesus. Furthermore, many hymns use outdated, archaic words not understood by the unchurched.

Many others, it appears, felt as I did. Over the next several years, most CMC churches incorporated some form of contemporary music into their worship services, and many abandoned the traditional hymn book all together.

But a funny thing is happening. Once a month at RBC, we distribute hymn books to our students in chapel and proceed to have what the elderly among us would call “a good old-fashioned hymn sing.” Though many of our students come from churches that don’t sing hymns, we don’t offer bribes. The concept of hymns is new, and most embrace it. You should hear them sing! And when it’s time to take selections, Paul’s admonition to orderliness is disregarded, and the room descends into utter chaos as students shout out the numbers of their favorite hymns.

After our last hymn sing, a student stopped by my office and said, “I think we should do that twice a month...at least.” As someone who dreaded hymn-sing-chapels as a student, I’m still trying to wrap my head around what is happening.

What is happening? This article isn’t really about hymns; it’s about changes and growth and recovering lost things.

One reason the church changes is because the challenges of one generation are different from the challenges of a previous generation, and the structures built to meet the moment for one group fail to meet the moment for the next.

It’s been my observation that this reality is a particularly sticky trap for older leaders. They are tempted to keep guarding the side of the city that was at war when they were young while failing to realize that the battle has moved to another location in which their experience could be very helpful. The next generation needs the experience and energy of elders to meet new challenges.

Another reason the church changes is because leaders are unable to effectively articulate to a new generation the reasons

we embrace particular beliefs and practices. Traditions left unexplained will likely pass away. But, practices, traditions, and beliefs need more than explanation; they need to address the challenges of present realities. So, why do our current students love hymns? All I have are theories. Here is one.

When I was at RBC, we wanted intimacy and closeness. Our Sunday school classes and Bible schools had been filled with Bible stories, Bible memory, learning important doctrinal concepts and the books of the Bible. But we longed to have our hearts moved, to feel close to this majestic God who often felt quite distant.

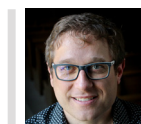
Many surveys document the fact that students today are growing up with less Bible knowledge. They spend less time in church. Vacation Bible Schools are less theologically challenging. Young people have been taught that God loves them and desires intimacy with them. They have been given every opportunity to express affection for God through worship songs.

Yet, unbeknownst to some leaders, the challenge shifted. Now what many students are craving is not “sacred romance,” but a majestic God who is worthy of their attention and capable of meeting their profound challenges. They want to know that a King really sits on the throne and has power to bring about righteousness and justice!

Hymns offer an “otherness” to the music they normally listen to, a reminder that God is holy and transcendent. They still crave intimacy with God, but live with the suspicion that there is more to God than what they have experienced.

The church changes, and it is helpful to carefully consider those changes. So, in the upcoming series of RBC articles for the *Beacon*, we are planning to explore old and new practices of the church. We are inviting church leaders to articulate reasons for why they wash feet or don’t, why they embrace co-vocational or full-time ministry, why they have a sharing time in their service or not.

Our hope is that we can spur helpful thinking as the church seeks to meet the discipleship needs of each new generation.

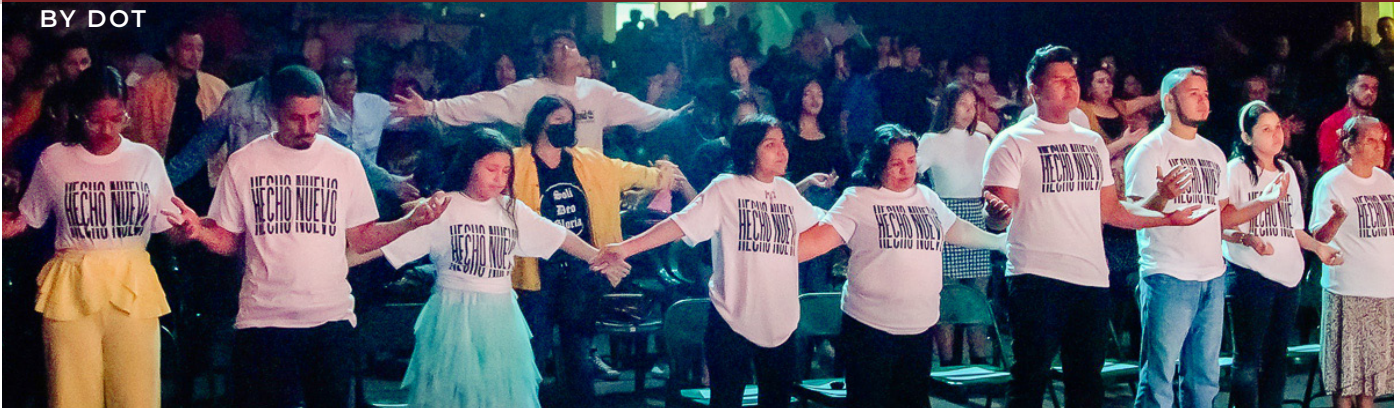


Jeremy lives in Rosedale, Ohio, with his wife, Sarah, and their four children. He is president of Rosedale Bible College and is committed to its mission to prepare Kingdom workers.



But God Gives the Increase

BY DOT



Larry and I walked into the church building; the rain began just as we entered. It was a torrential downpour, hitting the tin roof hard with its pounding. We were at the Comunidad Vida Church in Matagalpa, Nicaragua—one of the fifty-plus churches planted by Diego and Gloria Chavarria, owners of El Dorado coffee farm and providers of Café Diego.

In 2006, Diego and Gloria planted their first church at El Dorado. By the end of the year, they had planted a second church; before two years had passed, they had planted four churches outside Matagalpa. They were actively involved in these congregations when, in 2009, they decided to plant a church in the city of Matagalpa. They invited their daughter Ana and son-in-law Pablo to provide leadership for this fledgling congregation. A small group of believers began meeting in a restaurant, then in a small house on a corner lot. Larry and I were honored to join them several times.

After five years, the owner of the house gave them a three-month notice. Diego and Gloria secured a lease for an old theater and began to clean. They chose to do this by themselves, and spent days scooping filth and dust. It took perseverance and was discouraging work to say the least, but in the end, they had a space where they could meet.

In the thirteen years since these small beginnings, the congregation in Matagalpa has grown from an original gathering of thirty believers to a regular attendance of over three hundred. This growth was what brought all of us to this very special service—a baptismal for sixteen people.

The group to be baptized ranged in age from very young children to a woman close to 80 years in age. In previously recorded videos, each candidate gave a testimony of their walk with Jesus, how they have changed, and ended by saying how they have been made new in Christ. Each received a t-shirt with the statement *hecho nuevo*—made new—on the front. It was a blessed experience.

Following the baptismal, the congregation shared communion. As the pastor closed the service, he felt the Spirit telling him to give a call for others to follow Jesus. Fifteen people went forward! It was a beautiful sight to see this growth.

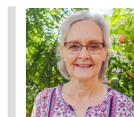
So much more could be written about the faithful work that Diego and Gloria have done and continue to do. But an important part of this story is that this work did not begin with them.

In the mid-1960s through the early 1980s, Rosedale International (then Rosedale Mennonite Missions), sent young people into the remote parts of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Colombia as voluntary service workers. In the mid-70's, several of those workers arrived in Guapotal, a small community in the mountains of Nicaragua.

The hosts for these workers were none other than Diego Chavarria's parents, who were Catholic and very influential in their community. RI's volunteer workers showed the love of Jesus to the Chavarria family and their community, presenting a holistic gospel that was very inviting and new to the family. Through the seeds they planted, each member of the Chavarria family became a follower of Jesus! To this day, those who lived in the area during this time speak with deep appreciation and fond remembrance of all of RI's volunteer workers. Their impact still lives.

We never know how God will grow the seeds we plant, but neither do we grow weary in the planting. Little did those young workers know that what they were doing would result in the growth we are just now seeing in Nicaragua fifty years later! Discouragement is often at our doorstep and yet, we plant in obedience to Jesus. He said to go and make disciples, so we go, we plant, and make disciples. God gives the increase!

"Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants, both of us—servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives to our mutual Master. We each carried out our servant assignment. I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow. It's not the one who plants or the one who waters who is at the center of this process but God, who makes things grow. Planting and watering are menial servant jobs at minimum wages. What makes them worth doing is the God we are serving. You happen to be God's field in which we are working" (1 Cor. 3:5-9, MSG).



Dot is employed by RI and has served alongside her husband, Larry, as RBG Director and LAMP Coordinator for many years. She loves seeing God work in the lives of others.