

The Church That's Continually Opening New Doors

by Dale E. Galloway

Galloway, a pastor for more than thirty years, author of more than a dozen books, and a popular speaker, has served as dean of the Beeson International Center for Biblical Preaching and Church Leadership, one of the schools of Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky.

The church's first Biker Weekend raised a lot of eyebrows. The senior pastor, Dr. Bob Huffaker, more than fifty years old, personally rode one of the sixty-four motorcycles involved.

For a few church members this was too much. Some asked pointedly if praying over a motorcycle was "desecrating" God, the church, or their holiness tradition. Bob replied with the same line he's used repeatedly over his fourteen years as pastor there: "We've got to be a church where lost people matter most." He wanted to create an experience that made a leather and do-rag wearing crowd feel welcome. He wanted to demonstrate the love of Christ and win a fresh hearing for the gospel message.

By 2005 Biker Weekend at Grove City Church of the Nazarene (www.grovecitynazarene.org) was more than an established annual event. It was the talk of the entire town of Columbus, Ohio. (Grove City is a southwest suburb of Columbus.) Church people went everywhere, from bars to motorcycle shops, to invite bikers to take part. Anticipating that the church facility couldn't handle the anticipated crowd, the church took the bold step of renting Columbus Crew Stadium.

The official buildup started on a Saturday, culminating in one of the largest-ever crowds for the church's Saturday-evening service, followed by a cookout at the home of Steve Combs, an associate pastor. "It was great to see nearly 200 bikes parked in Steve's yard," stated the church's website as it provided ongoing coverage of the weekend.

As early as 7:00 on Sunday morning, bikes began rolling in toward the staging areas. The church body came out in mass to prepare for all the bikers that were expected to participate. At noon two parades, one to the east and one to the west, made their way around the I-270 perimeter to Crew Stadium. Everyone was excited to see a helicopter overhead taking pictures as the group made its approach down the final stretch of the highway.

At the stadium, the church choir sang praise, worship, and "Sweet Home Alabama." After one biker was awarded a \$1,000 door prize, eight Harleys roared to life and brought a company of Marines on stage so church leaders could honor and pray for them. The service also included some serious moments of prayer for the bikers and challenge for them to welcome God into their lives.

In typical pattern, Bob gave full support to Biker Weekend but didn't lead it himself. In fact, the whole concept of Biker Weekend wasn't even his own. It was a wild idea from Steve Combs. At first everyone was apprehensive, but Bob championed it and was willing to take any heat.

"When I first suggested that we do something for bikers," Steve recalls, "Pastor Bob jumped at it." He told me, "I'll get the board behind this one"—and he did. Then as Biker Weekend grew for now eight years running, "he wasn't threatened," Steve says. Nor did Bob feel the need to be the primary preacher for the Saturday-night service that came out of the

biker ministry. "He's got an evangelistic heart and loves to see people saved. He could see we were rescuing a lot of people and so he's been our greatest supporter," Steve says. Indeed, even in its first year of existence, some 200 made a commitment to Christ at the Saturday-night service.

Bob explains it this way: "One of the best things I've done here is to bring good, competent people around me—people better than I am, talented people with a heart for our DNA as a church."

Always Looking for Another Open Door

Biker Weekend symbolizes in many ways the entire ministry of Bob Huffaker, during his tenure as senior pastor from 1991 until his retirement mid-year 2005. While he took a clear role as senior leader, he was always on the lookout for ways to encourage and empower others in ministry, especially as they opened new doors that would connect people with the church and its Lord.

"He's a cheerleader for every ministry," says Diane McNeilly, the church's pastor of assimilation. "He pats you on your back, and supports you in every way, and speaks well of you in front of other people."

Why did the church grow year after year during Bob's time there, becoming one of the largest in its denomination? "Probably because he allowed us as staff to come up with our own plans, and then he'd offer critique and coaching," Diane says. "That freedom and creativity is huge for the whole staff here, as we see new ways to meet needs of members, first-time attenders, and people we haven't yet reached."

Those values have a positive trickle-down effect on the members as well. "Pastor Bob led the staff on a quiet campaign to empower people to lead underneath us—to take them under our wings, and train them to be stronger leaders," she says. "It's been incredible to see a movement like that emerge." Diane, for example, has developed about twenty lay leaders in her assimilation ministry.

Other big front doors to the church have included a childcare ministry that started as people in the church noticed a need in the community. This led to an entire preschool wing, which has become the church's front porch, funneling families into the life of the entire church. The church's preschool and elementary-school ministries are vividly symbolized by a large indoor playground, far more extensive than found in any McDonald's, which was strategically placed so that many worshipers cannot get into a certain section of the sanctuary without passing it.

When someone's ministry grows, flourishes, and gets the limelight, Bob couldn't be happier. "A lot has to do with your own security," Bob explains. "As a church you do whatever it takes to reach the most people, not being threatened that others get the praise. I have to be secure in who I am. I need to remember is that it's not about me; it's about God. Otherwise I fall into the trap of fearing that people will like 'them' more than they will like me."

Started with an Enlarged Heart

Bob wasn't always like that. Back in 1984, he went to David Yonggi Cho's church in Korea, the world's largest church. It has a solid focus on reaching lost people and leans heavily on a healthy network of small groups. What Bob experienced there had a profound impact. "It stretched me to think bigger." As the church's sixth senior pastor, he also was appreciative of the big dreams that had been built into the DNA of the church, from its founding pastor [I was

blessed to serve in that capacity] through others. He and I first met in 1994 and have been friends ever since. "All the pastors before me have been good and solid people," he says.

Before coming to Grove City, Bob also saw through other churches the power of participative worship. So he transitioned the church he was serving into a more contemporary worship style. The church immediately began to grow. "In that atmosphere we began to attract younger families and unchurched people," he says. "It had a lot to do with our choice of musical instruments."

At that time it was unusual for a denominational church to embrace more contemporary worship styles, but Bob was willing to work through the challenges raised by longtime saints. "We were determined to be a church where lost people mattered most," he says. Bob brought that value to Grove City, where it was not met with nearly as much resistance as in his previous church.

Likewise, early on Bob discovered the spiritual power that comes through being a praying church. "God put in my heart to learn a lot about prayer," he says "If a church I serve was going to be a growing church, it had to become a praying church." For many years he has followed the personal discipline of trying to pray an hour each day.

How People Skills Help You Achieve a Big Dream

Through the years at Grove City, Bob has worked with a wide range of staff and lay leaders. He has repositioned many of them to find their greatest point of ministry effectiveness. Steve Combs was brought on to do small groups, but Bob kept helping him find outlets for using his gifts of evangelism, preaching, and love for motorcycles. Brady Wiseheart started in one role, and now as young adult pastor he leads a Sunday-night service. The church's longtime executive pastor, Don Bowman, was initially the youth pastor.

Don and others note Bob's genuine love for people, his sense of humor in working with people, and his gifts of leadership that find the right person needed for each new door God opens for the church. "When you meet him, it's so evident that he cares for you," Don says. "If you find him anywhere besides the pulpit, it will be with key leaders in the church and the city."

"I've known Pastor Bob for a long time, but I don't know anyone who seeks God the way he does," Don adds. "And Pastor Bob means it when he says, 'It's always about presenting Christ to the lost.'"

Becoming a Church Where Lost People Matter Most

There were scary moments for staff and congregation through Bob Huffaker's fourteen years at Grove City Church of the Nazarene. Most involved stepping into the unknown, such as becoming one of the only churches around with an indoor playground—or sponsoring a biker weekend. Another time Bob championed a vision to see 100 people baptized in one weekend, and it happened. Several building expansions have been needed along the way, which likewise took faith to challenge people to make major financial investments.

"It comes back to the DNA of this church," Bob says. "Lost people matter most around here, and that determines what we do. If what we're doing doesn't help us reach lost people, we're not going to do it."

Grove City Church of the Nazarene is all about opening doors, especially to the unchurched. "Since our primary goal is to reach those further away from God, it's nearly

always in our mind," Bob says. "We're always looking for another avenue to expand the Kingdom of God."

As Mark Fuller became the church's seventh senior pastor, Bob had a hand in helping select him. He also offered him some simple advice. "Talk about vision," Bob says. "Don't ever give up the vision." With a heart for lost people so deeply ingrained in the life of the church, it will be hard not to do so!

Warren Bird assisted with the research and writing of this article.

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