

BREAKTHROUGH

TRUSTING GOD FOR BIG
CHANGE IN YOUR CHURCH

Dawn Darwin Weaks



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Foreword

Every few weeks or so, we get another phone call or email. “We heard you made big changes at your church and it’s working out well,” they say. “Would you tell us about it?” At first, I jotted some of our church’s story down just to have an in-house history of God’s crazy-good faithfulness. But the more people asked for our story, the more I wanted to have something to give them so I could say, “Read this and then we’ll talk.” That’s how this little book came to be. Because if our church’s story can help other churches thrive, I’m all in. I still believe that the best way to share the gospel of Jesus Christ that gives hope to our world is through a community committed to following him. That’s right, the church.

I asked our church’s leaders how they felt about sharing our story more broadly. They enthusiastically endorsed the idea. However, some were a little surprised when I asked them to add their voices to the book! But when I explained that God moved through all of us working together, especially them, and most definitely not just me, they reluctantly agreed. They are some of the best Christian people ever. I think you’ll see why I think so. Also, my husband and co-pastor Joe’s voice had to show up occasionally in my telling of the story, just like it would if we were sitting around your dining room table. He’s half the pastoral team that led this transformation and a whole lot of my heart.

But the voice I really want you to hear in this story is God’s own voice, coming to you. That’s why there are questions to ponder and scripture to read from Luke’s gospel at the end of this book. Ideally, you and some church friends will lay our story beside yours, add the biblical stories too, then, look at it until you see something new. You very likely will. That’s how creative and dependable the Holy Spirit is. May you be ready to move when you get that holy nudge. Here’s what happened when we did.

*for Arwen Ruth and Sam Allen, best double preachers' kids ever,
who turned out more than okay*

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Acknowledgements

I don't know how to thank a whole congregation of amazing people for being fearless and faithful. I am so grateful to be one of the pastors of Connection Christian Church in Odessa, Texas! Also, I am not sure if I am just foolish to tell their story while I am still employed as their pastor, or maybe if I am just super trusting, but here goes. It's simply too good to keep. Thank you especially to the church members who wrote their testimonies for this book; you said it better than I ever could. Thank you too, to all of those church members whose names aren't mentioned here in print but whose behind-the-scenes faithfulness propelled, and still propels, our church forward. I'm also grateful to the folks at Chalice Press, to Indu Guzman, Rebecca Bowman Woods, Kevin Neece, and especially Brad Lyons, for believing in the Church and the power of our congregation to encourage other congregations with God's help. I'm grateful for dear colleagues who read the manuscript and offered their invaluable feedback. And I have a debt I'll never be able to repay to the ministers who pastored this congregation before me. We reap the fruit of the seeds others sowed. Especially big thanks go to our grown kids who went on this whole adventure with us, adding so much of their own love and energy. And most of all, thank you to Joe Weeks, my partner and colleague, who always gives me the senior minister's office and is my 24/7 helpline—and not just as technical support. But that too.

Hasn't God been good?

CHAPTER 1

Before

God is all about the too old, the too late, and the too dead. From the birth of Isaac to elderly Sarah and Abraham in Genesis to the resurrection of Jesus in the gospels, it's when things look bleak that God's powerful love is easiest to see at work. That's why our congregation dared to place our 110-year-old, slowly dying church into the hands of God, whose other name is "Surprise!"¹ This book tells you what happened when we did. Our story is for those who feel the air getting stale in their churches and hope for something more. It's for those who wonder if it's time to close the doors on God's work through their church. And most of all, this book is for those who dare to imagine where a new window might open if that door were to close.

I'm not telling you our church's story and introducing you to our congregational leaders so that your church can do exactly what we did. It doesn't work that way! Your situation is unique and different from ours. Therefore, in these pages, you will not find a snazzy program to follow. You most certainly will not find heroic pastors to emulate! You will also not find a special, secret, theological sauce that makes the magic happen. Instead, you *will* find gritty, well-grounded hope. Because while our churches may be different, our God is the same. So, you can have hope! Hope that our God still moves through the church. Hope that from the historical foundations of our congregations, the Holy Spirit can fashion a new future. Hope that God's plan for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ still happens through the people in the pews—or the people in the chairs. Let's start there.

¹John Claypool, "God's Other Name is Surprise," lecture at the Whitworth Institute of Ministry, Whitworth, WA, courtesy of the Northwest Digital Archives, August 23, 1985.

The summer I was fourteen years old, I was sitting outside on a metal folding chair during a church camp worship service. I remember the chair because it was the only thing cool on that hot July night. The preacher, who seemed old and gray to me at the time but probably was my age now, preached about God's blessings. I still remember one of the sermon's lines, "A blessing from God needs to pass *through* you, not just *to* you, if it's going to remain a blessing from God." As the preacher talked, suddenly, I felt like God was singling me out. It seemed like God wanted me to do something. It was not a voice, not an audible one at least. It was like the Holy Spirit just touched my shoulder somehow. Before I knew it, I was walking to the front of the worship service. I passed dozens of kids still seated in their cool metal folding chairs as I leapt into the heat of the unknown. I couldn't say why I was moving up front exactly. I only knew I had to say "Yes."

It had not, up to that point, occurred to me to be a minister. My dad was one. My mom had gone to seminary for a bit. I'd known women who were children's ministers and chaplains. The Baptist church I grew up in had women deacons, a rare thing. Back then, none of that ministry stuff had crossed my mind as something for me. Yet that night, I experienced the most urgent impression that God was calling me. To what, I did not know.

I'd been baptized when I was six years old, and had thought of myself as a Christian since then, so this wasn't about a confession of faith. When I made it up front to the preacher, I didn't know what to say, so I just said to him, "I think God is telling me to do something." He smiled, patted my back, and gestured for me to sit down on the front row of chairs. I did. The service ended, and that was it.

That moment may have faded into the background with all my other camp memories, if it weren't for Patty. I was a little befuddled about what to do, even where to go, after this seemingly holy nudge. People started packing up the folding chairs and shuffling off to the nightly camp games. But Patty, a 20-something seminary student, came over and sat beside me there on the front row. She said to me, "I saw what happened to you tonight. Did God speak to you?" I tentatively nodded yes. It felt very strange to claim such a thing had happened to me. Once Patty acknowledged my experience, I was comforted, but still frightened. Patty said, "I want you to write today's date down in

your Bible and put what you felt and heard. That way you will never doubt that this actually happened to you. You will always know that God called you." So that night back in the dorms I crawled up on my top bunk. After the counselor hollered for lights out, I grabbed my flashlight. I fished my Bible and pen out from under my pillow and dove in. "June 26, 1986. God called me and I said Yes," I wrote, and then tucked my confession back under my pillow. That now-tattered Bible with my scribbled Ebenezer has helped me in many an uncertain, despairing moment. It was real. God did call and I did answer. It's right there in ink, thanks to Patty.

It was a really good thing I wrote that down. The opposing winds were pretty brutal. What to me was a life-changing moment was often dismissed. As a female, I did not have the proper anatomical equipment to be taken seriously by very many. Meanwhile, I began the life-long process of weaning away from others' approval. I girded up my loins as I graduated from high school in 1989 and headed to college as a student of "full-time ministry."

About that same time in the oil patch of West Texas, First Christian Church of Odessa held a congregational meeting. The church was deciding if they would call their first woman to be an elder. In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, elders are the primary spiritual leaders of the church. Marita Hendrick, a lovely dark-haired woman always decked out in turquoise and a no-nonsense, can-do attitude, was nominated as the first woman elder in the church's 80-year history. Marita had earned the trust of the congregation over the decades by doing every job available to women at the time. When she agreed to be nominated, a couple of men tried to get her to back down. They told her that women in leadership would ruin the church. According to them, men wouldn't volunteer anymore if they knew women would do it! Marita simply reminded the men that they were her friends and nothing would change that. And, she said, didn't they remember the church had women leaders from the start? She was right. Years ago, the women in the church had rallied to raise funds for the church when all it had was dirt for a floor. Women selling their chickens' eggs and baked goods from their own kitchens were the reason the congregation even had a place to stand! Marita stood her ground and the congregational vote was held. It was decided by

an overwhelming but not unanimous vote: First Christian Church in Odessa, Texas would have women elders!

An incident decades earlier had prepared the congregation for making this stride toward the full inclusion of all people. That time, God moved through someone who *wouldn't* get out of his chair! In the 1950s, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) began to split between "Independent" Christians and "Brotherhood" Christians. In essence the division was about interpretation of scripture. Independent Christians wanted a narrower range of acceptable interpretation. The Brotherhood wanted to maintain room for the conscience of each person to interpret the Bible as each one felt led. Ironically, the "Brotherhood" became known for advancing women's equality based on scriptures that they interpreted as supportive of women's leadership. Many churches were dealing with this tug of war between understandings of the Bible. First Christian Church of Odessa was one of them.

The pastor at the time insisted upon the church going with the "Independent" branch in that denominational split. He saw the Bible in a more narrowly defined way. The elders disagreed, and prayerful dialogue seemingly failed. At the next elders' meeting, this pastor insisted that the church would join the "Independent" split from the denomination. He would not budge on his convictions, and the elders decided that was enough. They told the pastor that his time with this church was over. They asked him to pack up and depart. But he refused to leave. So, the story goes, two of the burlier elders went over to the pastor's chair, and picked it up. With him in it! A third elder held the door. They then sat the pastor, still in his chair, outside the building, in the alley. And they locked the door behind him! That very night, they changed the locks themselves.

From that moment on, First Christian Church displayed an unshakeable commitment to being a place of freedom of conscience and loyalty to the "Brotherhood" which became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination. Those elders, who took their shepherding role as protectors of the sheep very seriously, paved the way for strong congregational leaders, both male and female, to come. They and those who had come before them set the expectation that the pastor would not run the church; rather, a partnership of congregational leaders and pastors was the way the church would move forward. They would not

allow the pastor to dictate how the congregation was to understand scripture. Instead, they would make room for each person to grow in their understanding and interpretation as they matured in faith and connected in community. Thanks be to God!

Thirty years after that chair incident, the congregation decided women could be in any leadership role in the church. Marita became an elder, and later, the church confirmed her as the first female board chairperson. Meanwhile, I went from church camp to studying for ministry. I did not yet know that women could even be pastors; I was just trying to stay faithful to the “yes” I gave that propelled me off my folding chair and down the aisle. Marita paved the way for me, though she didn’t know it at the time. That’s why this book is not about hot shot pastors who followed a fancy program and turned their church around. This book is about courageous, unpaid, nonprofessional, dedicated congregational leaders who turned their church around, and the pastors who received the blessing of witnessing their moxie along the way. I am one of those pastors. So is my husband, Joe.

Another connection was beginning during those blue eyeshadow, big-hair 1980s when the church began to call women to serve in all leadership positions. My now co-pastor and husband Joe was growing up in the Houston area. His dad Rick was working in a steel mill. When Rick got laid off in the steel crash of the early 1980s, he went to work as a mail carrier. And it just so happened that the First Christian Church in Baytown, Texas, had a mighty fine water fountain on his route. When Rick delivered mail there, he would often grab a quick drink of water from their fountain. Rick suggested that the family try out the church with the good water fountain.

Soon after, Joe was baptized in that church. He was fully immersed into church life: choir, youth group, the church softball team, and of course, camps. The mentoring he received at camp made him think about becoming a minister. By the time Joe graduated from high school, he too sensed a call to ministry. He and I hadn’t met yet, but our trajectory of connection was beginning.

Have you ever noticed that watching God work often happens best in hindsight? Sometimes we as church leaders are working so hard to get past the past, we may overlook God’s powerful graces in it. The Holy Spirit was weaving connections long before we were aware it was

happening: connections for Joe and I to meet each other, for us both to be able to serve this storied congregation, and for our community to be reached by the gospel through our church in the twenty-first century. In 2014, Joe and I came to serve First Christian Church in Odessa as its co-pastors. Though we had some steep challenges ahead, we praised the Lord for all of the foundations that others had laid over the years.

And mostly, we prayed we never would have to be carried out in a chair!

In Their Words by Marita Hendrick

It was a time in our church's history, the 1980s, when women were not accepted in leadership positions. I was honored to have been asked to be an elder, the first woman elder. There was a lot of grumbling among the older men and women in our congregation. We even lost some members because they didn't think women should have a place at the communion table or, for that matter, in any leadership role. But the church pressed on, and I was elected.

A couple of years later we progressed even more, and I was asked to be the chairperson of our church board. That was the last thing some of our older gentlemen wanted, and they told me so. I joked around with them during that year, trying to ease their doubts, and before that year was over, they told me that while it had not been what they had expected, I had been a very good board chairman. That was the highest compliment I could have received from them.

I am delighted that things have changed. We have women serving in many areas of our church and have seven very capable women elders serving currently. Our church has gone through many changes in the past few years. I am so proud of our church for being a leader in our community, and probably, in the state of Texas. We look forward to future years knowing that God will show us the way.