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REACHING AUSTIN

ESTABLISHING AN APOSTOLIC CHURCH
IN A POSTMODERN CITY

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THE CALL

(1981–1992)

As we drove out of Austin, Texas, to begin our life and ministry in Jackson, Mississippi, I told Connie, my bride of two weeks, “I may be wrong, but I have a feeling that someday we’ll be back.”

It was June 1981. Connie, age twenty, was born and grew up in Austin. She had a good job at Southwestern Bell (now AT&T) prior to our marriage. I was twenty-four and grew up in Korea as the son of pioneer missionaries of the UPCI. In 1978, I had graduated from Rice University in Houston with a bachelor’s degree in mathematical sciences and managerial studies and had come to Austin to attend the University of Texas School of Law. We met at a small church in southeast Austin started by her grandmother. We were both involved in ministries for youth, Sunday school, music, and outreach.

The previous summer, I had worked for a major law firm in downtown Beaumont, Texas, with a view toward permanent employment after graduation. As I visited various UPCI churches in the city, ministry opportunities began to open up for me unexpectedly. One pastor heard from my

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pastor in Austin that I taught Bible studies and trained the church there, so he asked me to teach his church in the mid-week services. Another area pastor asked me to speak to his youth. A third pastor invited me to speak to his youth, while a fourth asked me to preach on Wednesday night. Other requests soon came. My last night before moving back to Austin, I realized I had spoken in church twenty-one times in eleven weeks while not presenting myself as a preacher. I hadn't sought to be a minister of the gospel, but God had changed my direction. As I prayed in my apartment, He gave me Colossians 4:17: "Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it." That night in 1980 I accepted a call to preach. I knew I should finish law school but committed myself to full-time ministry after graduation. Back in Austin, Connie and I began dating in October. (I had been interested for the previous two years, but she had not.)

The year 1981 saw many milestones in our lives. Connie and I became engaged in January, although we didn't announce it until March. I received ministerial credentials with the UPCI in March. God opened a door for full-time ministry just in time: I was hired as an administrator and instructor for Jackson College of Ministries (JCM) at the end of April to start in the summer. My first book (*In Search of Holiness*) was published in May. I graduated from law school on May 24. Connie and I were married on June 6. After a honeymoon in Cozumel, Mexico, we moved to Jackson to begin employment on June 22. Later that year, I passed the examination to become a member of the State Bar of Texas. We expected to work at JCM for at least three

to five years, but our long-term vision was church planting and growth. We believed that eventually we would go to a large city to start a church or assume the pastorate of a small church.

Over the years, we carried a burden for Austin, and we returned at least once a year to visit Connie's family. Before our marriage, our pastor had asked us to consider starting an outreach in North Austin, which had no UPCI church, as an extension of his church. We would need to support ourselves with secular employment and continue working in the mother church. We didn't think we were ready for such an endeavor. Instead, we believed God would open a door for immediate, full-time ministry.

In 1986, after five years in Jackson, we seriously contemplated starting a church in Austin. We consulted with family, friends, spiritual leaders, the presbyter, and the district superintendent. All human signs were encouraging, yet we didn't feel positive direction from the Lord, so we didn't go. Instead, I accepted an offer from the editor in chief of the UPCI to serve as the associate editor at the world headquarters in Hazelwood, Missouri, in metropolitan St. Louis. He had first asked me to consider the position in 1984, but I didn't feel a release from the college until circumstances changed two years later.

In subsequent years, we were approached about three other ministerial opportunities in Austin. One pastor anticipated he would become the pastor of a large church in another city but wanted to remain as senior pastor in Austin as well, so he asked me to serve as his assistant there. Then, the presbyter contacted me about a small church in a rented

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building that needed a pastor and financial support. After prayer, I told him I didn't feel led to take it. Later, an established church needed a new pastor, and one of the board members sent word that they wanted to consider me. I waited to hear from the district superintendent. When he didn't contact me, I eventually called him. He responded that they would be glad to consider me, but the presbyter had told them I wouldn't be interested, and they had already scheduled another minister to preach for them. When I heard the name, I knew he would be chosen and didn't pursue the matter. I thought the presbyter shouldn't have spoken for me without contacting me, but I knew our ministry was in God's hands and trusted that at the right time He would open the right door.

A friend told me I just needed to stay in St. Louis, predicting that some years later I would become editor in chief and thus a member of the UPCI General Board. But Connie and I knew our stay at headquarters wasn't permanent, for God had called us to pastor. Indeed, during our time there we decided to live moderately, eliminate all debt except our home mortgage, build a retirement plan, and save as much money as possible. We knew that if we started a church or became pastor of a small church, we would need to support ourselves and eventually contribute significantly to a building program. We wanted to be free to go wherever God called us, without unnecessary financial constraints.

In 1991, our burden for pastoring intensified. We knew a change was coming, but we didn't know when or where. Once again, we began praying, seeking counsel, and gathering necessary information. Again, I spoke to the district

superintendent. He encouraged us to come to Austin and predicted that, if we started a church, it would eventually become the premier UPCI church in the city. Since there were already four English-speaking churches, including two large ones, this idea seemed unlikely.

Unknown to us, however, the UPCI would ultimately lose three of those churches. One was small and struggling; after the pastor joined the Charismatic movement, it soon closed, and the pastor divorced. One went through a succession of pastors, lost its building due to financial mismanagement, and eventually closed. One gradually changed its identity to nondenominational and left the Apostolic movement altogether. The remaining church is the one Connie's paternal grandmother, Edith Sharpe, started in 1951, after previously helping to begin the first UPCI church in the city. It is on the south side, twenty-five miles from the church we established. In addition, there is a Korean church whose original nucleus came from a Korean-English Bible study I had taught while a law student.

Austin definitely needed more churches, especially on the north side. In 1992, its population was five hundred thousand, while the total metropolitan area had eight hundred thousand. Moreover, it was growing rapidly—three to four percent per year. It was the capital of Texas, the second-largest state in both population and land area, and many governmental agencies were located there. The three main industries were the state government, education, and information technology. It was the home of the University of Texas (UT) with fifty thousand students plus other colleges that increased the area student population to one hundred

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thousand. Austin was the headquarters of Dell Computer, Tracor (now BAE Systems), and National Instruments as well as a major site for many other software and hardware companies including IBM, Apple, 3M, Advanced Micro Devices, Texas Instruments, many start-ups, and (later) Samsung. Among large cities in the US, it was typically in the top five for education (fifth in 2020, with 51 percent of the population having a bachelor's degree), bookstores per capita (second in 2015), and restaurants per capita (fifth in 2020). It called itself "the live music capital of the world," as it had more live music venues than any other city. As of 2020, Austin had a population of one million, making it the eleventh-largest city in the US, with two million in the metropolitan area. The Colorado River, including Lady Bird Lake, divides the city into distinct subcultures of north and south, with the Capitol, UT, and most high-tech companies in the north and more of the traditional Texans in the south. A pastor in South Austin joked, "I have the bubbas, and you have the yuppies."

The spiritual challenge was also great. Austin is socially and politically the most liberal city in Texas and one of the most liberal in the US. One of my law school classmates called it "a liberal oasis in a conservative desert." Hippies still roam downtown. Austin's informal slogan is "Keep Austin Weird," as it is known for unusual personalities, unique venues, laid-back atmosphere, casual approach to life, and "anything goes" philosophy. Located at the beginning of the scenic Hill Country, it is filled with or surrounded by natural wonders, historical sites, and unique towns. The population is diverse with immigrants from around the world. Many

corporations and individuals have relocated from the East and West Coasts because of the favorable business environment, educated workforce, lower cost of living, zero personal income tax, spacious land, mild winters, beautiful environment, educational opportunities, and cultural attractions. Of course, the rapid growth has put pressure on these positive features and sped up the pace of life.

Texas is in the Bible Belt, but not Austin. Only 10 percent of Austin's population identify as evangelical Christians, while 5 percent identify as LGBTQ. It has the only nude beach in Texas, a county park on Lake Travis known as Hippie Hollow. Madalyn Murray O'Hair founded American Atheists in Austin. A Muslim mosque, Hindu temple, Buddhist temple, and Taoist (Chinese) temple were all located within a five-mile radius of the church we established. The other major cities of Texas have many Christian churches over ten thousand in weekly attendance, but Austin has only a few megachurches of two thousand to twenty-five hundred. Some ministers told me they wouldn't want to pastor in such an environment, but I saw an opportunity. In a place where people don't hold to tradition and will listen to all viewpoints, we have an advantage. Unlike other philosophies and religions, we have the power of the Word and the power of the Spirit. Eventually, we did establish what became the largest Apostolic church in Austin and a network of churches with two thousand constituents, while affirming the Apostolic message and life.

Connie and I were willing to consider cities across the US. I had lived four years in Houston, knew the city well, and had participated in much outreach there. I ministered

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occasionally in the Boston area and was intrigued by its history, education, and need. As we discussed various areas, we concluded there were many needy cities in which we could be successful, but in most of them others could do as well or better. Believing that God is a good steward, we sought a city in which our background could be most advantageous. Considering my international and educational experience as well as Connie's musical training (twelve years of classical piano and a degree in Christian music from JCM), we narrowed our focus to a few cities. Because of our connections and experience, Austin quickly emerged as the top choice, although Connie was concerned about mistaking her personal love of home for the will of God.

We visited her family for Christmas 1991 and spent time in focused prayer just before returning to St. Louis. During our prayer on December 31, something happened that I had never experienced in quite the same way. I asked God to fulfill Romans 8:26: "For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (NKJV). Immediately I felt as if a heavy weight were crushing my chest, almost as if I were drowning, and I began speaking in tongues forcefully with intense sobs and gasps. It took great effort to utter the words, yet they came by the unction of the Holy Spirit. Afterward I told Connie, "I don't know the final answer yet, but now I have assurance that God is going to reveal His will soon." Back at home in St. Louis on January 2, we prayed together again for definite direction, and we both felt a strong sense of victory. As we rejoiced, we received confirmation that we were to make

plans immediately to begin a new church in Austin. We looked at each other and said, “Let’s do it!”

Now that we were confident of our calling, we listed seven additional things that needed to happen to make our dream a reality: sell our house in St. Louis County, secure employment, confer with the UPCI pastors in Austin, receive approval from the Texas District Board, obtain a house, find a place to begin services, and gather a small nucleus of people. One by one they were fulfilled. After we made our commitment, we faced some unexpected challenges, but by that time it was too late to back out. We prayed for God to confirm His word to us, and in the end, God supplied our needs.

We put up our house in St. Louis for sale by owner, planning to turn it over to a real estate agent if we couldn’t sell it in one month. Within three weeks we had a buyer at our asking price, which represented a good return on our investment. Not long before closing, the buyer’s financing fell through, so I helped arrange a loan through another mortgage company. We also faced some last-minute complications on our purchase. For a while, it seemed that both sales might be aborted. Nevertheless, we closed the sale of our St. Louis home on one day and the purchase of our Austin home the next day.

Before I met the Texas District Board in Lufkin, Connie flew to Austin to look for a house. I told her to give me her top three choices. If the board approved our application, I would travel to Austin and negotiate on the options. She found a suitable home in northwestern Austin that the owners had recently redecorated and in which they

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had installed new appliances. They had to sell unexpectedly due to health. Connie told me the house wouldn't remain on the market until I arrived; we needed to make an immediate decision. It was the ideal house in a good location and neighborhood. To clinch the sale with me, she said the décor was fine; we wouldn't need to do any repainting or wallpapering. I negotiated by telephone, and the sellers accepted the price we offered, which was less than the two previous owners had paid. Connie signed the contract to buy the house, contingent on district approval of our church application. When I gave my consent to the real estate agent she said, "You really must trust your wife. I've sold many homes to the husband without the wife but never to the wife without the husband." It was a good deal financially, so I responded that if my wife was happy, then I was happy.

After arriving in Austin, I drove around our target area and visited several churches to ask if we could rent their building at a low cost. I soon made an agreement with a pastor for Sunday evenings. After we moved to town, however, the church rescinded its consent. The pastor explained apologetically that although the church board had previously authorized such rentals, when they learned we were Pentecostal they became concerned that we might attract some of their members. I started contacting churches again and eventually found a Czech Brethren church that we rented for Sunday afternoon and Tuesday night at \$300 per month.

I proposed to my boss that I would continue to work as associate editor from Austin, doing 75 percent of the work for 50 percent of the compensation. I would edit digitally at

home, submit manuscripts by email, and come to St. Louis once a month for several days in the office. Since I was relatively young, age thirty-five, I could secure private health insurance cheaper than the group rate, and the savings could go toward salary. He accepted my plan. I continued to evaluate all book and tract submissions, edit all approved books and tracts, correspond with authors, edit the *Forward* (quarterly magazine for ministers), and assist with the *Pentecostal Herald* (official monthly magazine, now *Pentecostal Life*). We continued this arrangement through the spring of 2000, when I resigned because the church had grown to four hundred and was moving into its Phase Two sanctuary.

Before meeting the district board, I felt it was important to contact the UPCI pastors in Austin to inform them of my plans, assure them of my ethics, and ask if they had any advice or concerns. They were welcoming, including our former pastor who was also the presbyter, except for one who expressed concerns. His church was large and growing, and I assured him there would be no conflict, but Connie's family attended his church. Her maternal grandparents lived on a ranch about an hour away, and for years her grandfather had been the senior board member of another church. A few years prior, he had the unpleasant task of confronting a pastor who had committed wrong. The pastor initially denied everything, so Connie's grandparents and parents were forced to find refuge elsewhere, although later the pastor had to resign when the truth became public. I knew they would want to help us plant a church and wouldn't understand if I said they couldn't. Connie had other relatives whom we expected to stay at their church, which they did. This answer

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satisfied the district board when I met with them. The pastor did not formally oppose my application but asked me to reconsider it for friendship's sake and questioned whether I could preach evangelistically and win souls. I said we would find out! Connie and I felt confident because both of us had been involved in winning souls over the years.

We moved to Austin on March 28 with our two boys—Jonathan, age six, and Daniel, age three. Our daughter, Lindsey, was on the way; she was born June 16. I had to return to the office in St. Louis on March 31 through April 2. In retrospect, God's timing was perfect. Unknown to us, about this time several other families also moved to Austin who were seeking truth and who would become building blocks of our new church. In the late 1980s, Austin's economy declined severely, but in the early 1990s it began to boom. We were able to buy a home and land for a church just before real estate prices soared.

Eleven years later, we were back in Austin. The journey had begun!



Aerial view of Austin



Texas State Capitol, Austin