

Staying the Course

*"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service"
1 Timothy 1:12 NAS*

I believe most of us would agree that we are all moving at a faster pace of life now than we ever have before. Sometimes we get so busy with our life that we put it on "auto pilot", allowing life to shape us instead of us intentionally living for Christ. It is good to periodically stop where you are and contemplate where you are going and why. This summer I have felt God challenging me to take that look back and to measure where I am with where I believed He was leading us. Nine years ago I sat down with the purpose of answering the question: "If money and other resources were of no consequence, what do you think God would have you do?" I wrote my answer November 25, 1990, "I would begin a ministry known as *Heart Growth*". Here is what I wrote:

Realizing that a person's commitment to Christ begins with a "heart" commitment to Him, HG's purpose is to strengthen the heart for Christ from the initial decision forward, building an intimate, personal relationship with Christ.

Ours is a ministry to the "normal" person in the church. They have accepted Christ as their personal Savior, repented of their sins and are following Him to the best of their ability. Quite honestly, there is no one available to help them from here. Why? Because programs of counseling have been set up to help those in deep trouble, programs of evangelism have been established to reach the "lost" and programs of development have been created to make sure the church has enough money to meet its budget.

We, the church, are in a great war. As in any war there are casualties; those who are killed, those critically wounded and those who are less severely wounded, perhaps a piece of shrapnel in the arm...not a big piece, it just irritates. But it is the slightly wounded who are the biggest untapped resource in our congregations. We have all seen them...They come into the church, learn of the freedom salvation offers, accept the offer in obedience to Christ and are "on fire" for the Lord. Somehow, over the years, this fire dwindles until it finally burns out. What happened? Well...these are normal people. So they are expected to get all the nourishment they need from Sunday School and church, retreats and special seminars. All this while they are teaching Sunday School, serving on the board or other leadership committees and carrying on the responsibilities of work and family. The church body seems blind to the fact that these people are wounded too, could it be they don't care?

It starts with a splinter in the finger. It's nothing big, a squabble with a member of the family, a past sin as yet not totally under control, a failed relationship. It hurts, but it's not big enough to bother anyone with..."I can still function." Eventually the sliver gangrenes and the Christian dies. "What ever happened to Bill?" "Oh, I don't know, he just lost interest." The churches have become somewhat like the shepherds of Ezekiel 34 who take care of some of the flock but not the whole flock. In actuality, the church would be better prepared to minister to

the needs of the severely injured if they had a system of caring for the scrapes and bruises of the majority of the church population.

In short, we need someone taking out the splinters, putting a band-aid on the scrape, cleaning out the wounds of the injured. We need someone taking care of the normal people because even normal people stumble and fall. As the health of the normal falls so too does the power of the body of Christ.

We bought a computer for the kids. One of the shareware programs we put on the system was an arcade game. Each of us got involved in trying to beat the game. Each round we beat was a victory; we kept track of our highest score. The anticipation was thick each time we played the game; what would the next unconquered round hold for us. What would the key to breaking it be? The longer we played the game the more we learned about what the key was to beating the game in each round. First the fourth round proved unbeatable, but it fell, then the fifth, it too fell, then the ninth...boy, no one could beat the ninth...but we did. Then one day I got as far as the twenty second round, by good fortune, not by design. Dad was the champ! He made it to the 22nd round. Then it happened, I broke the code. I found out the secret to beating each round. In the later rounds the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 16th rounds repeated themselves. Once you knew how to beat those rounds you could beat the system. One day I sat down to play. I made it to the 139th round, I racked up more than 1.8 million points when the machine gave up. I still had 12 lives to fight it with. I lost my desire to play, I knew how it worked, the thrill was no longer there.

Such could be the life of the Christian in the local church. The challenge to live for Christ is there for many years. But at some time they need more than the gospel message and the "spam" taught in the average adult Sunday School class. The truth is, the Christian life should never lose its challenge. But right now the church is offering only a variation of the same four rounds in our arcade game. Once you know the rules you can go on automatic pilot. The challenge is gone, the church has no impact on my life.

If all this is true a multitude of questions arise. Among them:

- How will HG achieve its purpose?
- How will it be funded?
- For whom should it be established, the individual, the church?
- How broad should its ministry be?
- Should it minister to the dysfunctional? (To do so complicates the ministry)
- What would our programs look like?
- What training is required?
- Who does the training?
- From where will the material come?

It is so much easier to come up with a ministry concept than it is to develop the ministry.

Nine years later I am amazed to see where God has brought us and how closely it resembles the dream He gave us in November, 1990. I probably haven't looked at this document since around the time I wrote it.

It has never been a template for where we are, but it is so close to what we are doing. Although today I would write it a little different, not quite so many absolutes and with a lot more compassion for the difficulty of ministry in our dying world, the end result would be the same. Rather than Heart Growth God has given us the Ministry *Life Focus*, a name I believe is more descriptive of the need of the church and our call for her.

Perhaps what amazes me most is how God has brought focus to our dream. "Ours is a ministry to the 'normal' people in the church." In 1991, God allowed us to work with *Churches Alive!*, establishing small group discipling in congregations in California and Oregon. This was discipling the "normal" people in the church. Discipling in small groups was very effective but became threatening to those in leadership who weren't a part of the discipling. After five years I realized discipling must flow through congregational leaders, not outside consultants. It is the leaders themselves who need to be taught how to lead spiritually. They are the ones called and the only ones who can minister to the "normal" people.

Ministering with *Churches Alive!* taught me the importance of spiritual leadership. It was here that God began to use me in the lives of pastors. It was here I learned how lonely they can be, how grateful they are to have a listening ear and how important it is for them to have someone walking beside them. Most pastors have the training needed to develop spiritual leadership in a congregation, but they are by themselves. They not only need someone walking beside them to keep them accountable, they also need support in training their leaders to move forward with spiritual objectives instead of temporal ones. I could not convey this clear enough to the leadership at *Churches Alive!* so God has led us to develop *Life Focus Ministries*.

For the last two years God has continued to bring focus to our ministry. He has not only used us in pastors' lives He has used us in several church conflict issues as well. We have been able to answer the question about focus and curriculum for *Life Focus*. We are intent on drawing from God's Word every principle He wants us to teach. I am writing most of the material I use because I have found most everything which is marketable has a broader focus than that which God has given us.

God taught me through the ministry at Los Banos that the family is a microcosm of The Church. If leadership within congregations is going to change it must begin with the way they live their personal lives. It begins with their quiet times before the Lord, with their relationship with their spouse and kids, with who they really are. Only when those relationships are in focus can ministry to others occur. Until then they will not have the focus or balance they need for spiritual leadership. Discipling must be to individuals, one on one or in small groups, just like Jesus did it.

Two major questions remain unanswered or only partially answered for this ministry:

- ? How will we achieve our purpose? IE: What is the environment in which God would use our gifts? We are not a part of the "marketing" culture of Christianity. In what arena would God use our ministry?
- ? How will we be funded.? Our regular support is \$500-800 a month less than our minimum monthly bills. How would the Lord have us raise funds not only for monthly support but for ministry development as well?

These too will be answered as God teaches us all aspects of this ministry.

We have found that the last sentence of what I wrote in November, 1990, is very true: "It is so much easier to come up with a ministry concept than it is to develop the ministry." However, God has clearly shown us over the last nine years that He is faithful. We have learned that His timing is perfect. May we be faithful and intentional in all we do in His name.

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