**My First Church in Lamar, Colorado**

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At twenty-seven years old, I was pastoring my first church. The pastor that had established the church had left, on a sour note, several months before I accepted the call to lead this small congregation. The church was in a small town in the Colorado plains and at one time, had a congregation of around one hundred twenty people, a mega-church, if you will, for such a small community.

Many of the people that went to that church had come from other, denominational churches to this non-denominational church. They had never heard many of the teachings in the churches in which they were raised. To allow many of the people to attend midweek services at their church on Wednesday nights, the small church I later pastored, changed their midweek services to Thursday evening.

As the church began to grow, so did the young pastor’s salary. A grand piano was leased with large monthly payments even though no one could play the piano in the congregation but surely, by faith, God would send a piano player! The pastor’s sermons were so incredible that he felt they should all be recorded and made available to the congregants for a “love offering”. A book store was established in the church and the books were purchased on credit. The church building had been an empty steel building on a major highway on the outskirts of town. Carpet was laid, chairs purchased and a local heating and air conditioning company was hired to install heating and air conditioning systems, on credit of course.

One young couple in the church, new Christians, owned a restaurant in town and the pastor and his wife would frequent their establishment and charge their meals. When their bill became quite high, the owner asked if the pastor could at least pay down the bill. The next week, the owner of the small restaurant saw the pastor’s car at the restaurant across the street and he and his family never came back to the first restaurant, nor did they ever pay their bill.

At one time, the church had a full time secretary. She related to me later how that the pastor would “counsel” women in his office, door shut which is a compete “No-No” as any minister can tell you. As the counseling continued, with one married woman in particular, unusual and no so appropriate sounds would come from the pastor’s office. Eventually, the pastor beat his wife up, leaving her for dead in his new Porshe sports car that he had bought on credit and he left town with the woman he had been counseling.

Like the aftermath of a small town that has just been hit by a tornado, the small church members were left reeling. Not quite sure what had happened, many of them totally unaware of the pastor’s indescretions, they tried to figure out what their next step would be. After all, they were told it was unscriptural to question what their pastor was doing and he was the president of the 501c3 corporation.

Two-thirds of the people left the church but a few people, probably thirty in number held on to the hope that they could see the church rise from the ashes. The whole town talked about the actions of the pastor and many of them mocked the body of Christ and it’s ministers.

I had just graduated from seminary and heard about the church through the man who was my pastor when I left to go to school. I got in contact with people from the church and drove out to check the church out and more importantly, let them check me out. With my wife and two young children in tow, we headed to Colorado. Even though the church had been through things that would completely destroy most churches, the people had managed to hang on and they seemed to feel that God wanted them to stay in the church and make it work. My wife and I felt that it was an opportunity that God had led us into so we agreed to go and pastor the church after the church let us know that they felt we should be there.

After about two months at the new church, a middle aged man and woman walked through the doors and attended a Sunday morning service. The seemed very congenial and said they were excited to see that we had come to pastor the church. When they left that Sunday, I immediately had people come to me and warn me of this couple and their extended family. They had been known for breaking up, at my count, at least five churches. My response was, “Well God is big enough to take care of that, let’s just trust Him.” It wasn’t long until many of this couple’s family began to come to church. One daughter and her husband began to lead some of the praise and worship for us and the church began to grow because of the addition of this family.

The church was left with about $60,000 dollars of debt from the previous pastor. The leader of the organization the church was affiliated with flew to Colorado and went with the pastor to see if they could help him borrow the money to consolidate the debt. None of the local banks would touch the mess. After the pastor left, the remaining people had reduced the debt to around $30,000 by paying much of it and by giving things back, like the grand piano. That was still a lot of money in 1987.

I had spoken to many of the creditors including the man who owned the building the church was in, the owner of the company that had provided all of the cassette tapes for the recording of the “incredible” messages and the owners of the heating and air conditioning company that had provided heating and cooling for the church. I let them know that we would be taking special offerings to try and satisfy the debt left by the other pastor.

In between my times of studying, praying and preaching sermons, I was also vacuuming the carpets, cleaning the toilets and working as the bookkeeper, all of this on the agreed upon salary of $525 a month, if they had it. I honestly don’t remember a time that the church actually had enough money to pay the full salary but I will tell you that the people there gave more than they could afford to give!

One day, in the grocery store, the lady, the matriarch of the family that had been known for breaking up churches, approached me and told me, “We do not need to pay that pastor’s bills!. They were his bills, not ours!” I told her that I understood how she felt but as Christians and as good stewards of God’s church, we needed to pay the people back that had trusted the church and had given them credit. I explained to her, as I had in the church, that we would take one monthly offering that would completely go to paying off the church’s debt. I asked each member to pray and do what God would have them do. I explained to her that she did not have to give into that offering if she did not feel led to do so. She got very upset and still though that we should just walk away from the debt and I could not agree with her.

After that chance meeting at the grocers, there was a marked change in her and her family’s attitude. The daughter and her husband that had been leading some of the praise and worship had a special anointing on their music but that began to taper off. The daughter and the husband came to my house one day and said they could not continue to be in the church because of the debt issue Eventually the entire family left, including some other friends that they had brought to the church.

Many of the people in the church were really upset about it and I tried to reassure them that God knew exactly what was going on. I even explained to them that sometimes there is such a thing as, “addition by subtraction”, meaning that sometimes God has to get people out of the way in order to bring more in.

This family was committed as long as they felt like I was doing what they wanted me to do. When I did something that was contrary to what they felt was right, they left and not only that, they began to sow discord among other Christians. One thing is very clear in the Bible, God will not put up with those that “sow discord among the brethren” (Psalm 16:19).

Well, this family left the church and took one or two other couples with them. Things just weren’t working. The company that had installed the heating and air-conditioning in the church building wanted us to sign a statement that we would pay so much money a month to try and pay off the debt they were owed. I spoke to my board members and they agreed to do it so we met with the men from the company and their attorney and signed an agreement. The man who owned the church building sold it to the church on a balloon payment arrangement. We were paying $400 a month but the payments were set to go up to $1,200 a month if my memory serves me correctly. There was no way we could make those payments. This man was so nice. He really wanted us to be in the building and he did everything he could to make it possible for us to stay there.

Things just never did pick up and the board and I finally decided we had to close the church. We sold what we could and put that money on bills. In lew of payments that I had never received, the church gave me the sound system. It wasn’t worth much. There was a minister in town who was not actively pastoring and he was looking for a sound system. He didn’t have any money but he did have an older Kawasaki 750cc motorcycle. We ended up swapping. That motorcycle saved me a lot of money on gas when I pastored my next church.

I had developed a great friendship with the Assemblies of God pastor in town. We suggested that people move with us to his church which was on the opposite side of town. We were on the extreme north side of town and his church was on the very south side. I took kind of an associate pastor roll and preached for him a few times until we found a church in Cuero, Texas that was in need of a pastor. I drove down, preached and felt good about the church and they wanted me so we finally moved back to Texas.

I’m sure people still talk about that church in Lamar and the terrible things that happened with the other pastor and the people from Pueblo, Colorado that helped him get it going. Those kinds of things leave a black eye on the Body of Christ.