

THIRD IN A SERIES

OUTSTANDING
CHURCHES OF
AMERICA

THE Music OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Nashville's Belmont Church of Christ and the Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa, California, were both small, insignificant congregations that grew in numbers and stature as they stepped into the light of the Holy Spirit's renewal. And then these two outstanding churches gave us some of the top Christian musicians of this decade.

Its astonishing power as a tool for teaching, testifying and, most importantly, transformation, resists all efforts to institutionalize and codify," wrote Charles E. Fromm, president of Calvary Chapel's Maranatha Music Company in Costa Mesa, California, in a paper presented at the Oxford Reading and Research Conference in Oxford, England.

He was writing about music.

"Throughout history, music has been a primary means of expression for people whose lives have been touched and changed at the deepest levels. The spirit responds to an encounter with God; man is delivered, renewed and set on a high place. A fresh expression of spontaneous praise and worship celebrates the deliverance. The experience of salvation becomes the substance of song. God is glorified, faith is revitalized and the community is blessed.

Music.

"Every time the people of God open themselves to renewal, they rediscover singing," says Dr. Paul Benjamin.

Thus it has been in two of America's outstanding churches.

BELMONT CHURCH OF CHRIST NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Nashville describes itself as the "Music Capital of the World." But transferring that musical talent from the Grand Old Opry into the church can be quite another matter—especially if that church is a traditional Church of Christ.

In the Church of Christ, musical instruments are forbidden. Scriptural passages are noted where no instruments were used in the early church. Thus, it is reasoned, none is appropriate in the restored church.

Yet music has long been a part of Belmont Church of Christ, which counts among its active, Spirit-filled membership more than 40 professional musicians, including America's top gospel soloist, Amy Grant.

On any given Sunday morning, you may also spot in the pews Gospel Music Association Dove Award-winner Brown Bannister and the Grammy's Best Male Gospel Performer 1983, Russ Taff. Sitting down from them may be songwriters Tricia Walker, Don Rogers, Michael W.

Smith and such figures in the Christian music world as lyricist Mike Hudson, producer Mike Blanton, songwriter/composer/singer Chris Christian, drummer/singer/producer Joe English, Christian rock pioneer Marty McCall, Southern gospel veterans Hazel and Henry Slaughter, composer/pianist Shane Keister, singer Kathy Troccoli and teachers/singers Steve and Annie Chapman.

Obviously, the century-old Belmont Church of Christ is not any average Church of Christ. It's one of the oldest and largest in the Church of Christ fellowship—a national system of locally autonomous and fundamentalist churches which lack any national hierarchy and spurn the label "denomination."

The Churches of Christ—like their doctrinal sisters, the denominational Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ (North American Christian Convention)—trace their beginnings back to

the old Campbellites of America's early years. They take much of their doctrine from the teachings of Alexander and Thomas Campbell, and before them, John Calvin.

But unlike any other large group of believers, the Churches of Christ have resisted the use of musical instruments in church services, limiting their singing to hymn books with oddly shaped notes, designed to help the congregation sing a capella.

Belmont's old church building with traditional wooden pews and frayed carpet is jammed against the street in a once deteriorating section of Nashville, which is now being renovated, just a few blocks from Vanderbilt University and Country Music Hall of Fame.

It's not exactly the sort of environment to foment musical creativity or to give birth to such talent as Miss Grant. But the Holy Spirit rarely moves when and where men predict.

Revival came to Belmont with the arrival of a controversial, yet low-key college professor named Don Finto. He's

quick to note that renewal at Belmont centered around a group of church elders who caught the vision of Pentecost.

It was a situation where some religious experts said the Holy Spirit would never be permitted. They were wrong.

Tall, balding, with a soft voice that comes out with a slight lisp, Finto is disarming in appearance and demeanor. A scholar with a doctorate of philosophy from Vanderbilt in German and church history, he came to Nashville 21 years ago to teach at the nerve center of the Churches of Christ, the scholarly David Lipscomb College.

A native of Lamesa, Texas, he went to high school in nearby Lubbock and completed his undergraduate studies at the Churches of Christ's prestigious Abilene Christian University with a major in Bible and minors in speech and music.

Over the next 20 years, he attended the University of Hamburg, Germany—where he served as a missionary for several years—then finished his Ph.D. work at Vanderbilt.

During those years, he was also involved in ministry in several churches and lectured as a visiting professor at various Church of Christ institutions, such as Pepperdine College and his alma mater, Abilene Christian. He wound up at David Lipscomb as head of the modern languages department.

Then in 1969, the Church of Christ minister received the baptism in the Holy Spirit—an extreme rarity in his fellowship of churches and often grounds for expulsion from the brotherhood.

"It was just a faith place of standing in Scripture and knowing God would do a fresh work in me," he says.

Actually the seeds had been planted two or three years earlier when a small group of couples began meeting with Don and his wife, Martha, to explore biblical concepts outside the accepted doctrine of the Church of Christ—including, among other things, the use of musical instruments in the church. This led to an encounter with the Holy Spirit.

The renewed Don Finto caused quite a sensation on the deeply traditional



The Belmont congregation during a song service.

THE *Music* OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

David Lipscomb campus. Students saw a change in him and began to flock to his classes, his office and the little Una Church where he was pastoring. Through his influence these same students began to reach out to kids with drug problems who habituated a well-known local park. It was the first time they had been challenged to do anything more than study and debate their doctrine with those who disagreed.

In 1971 Finto reached the difficult conclusion that he no longer belonged at the college or his church because of differences in doctrine. Without any indication of what was next in life, he resigned his professorship as well as his position as pastor at Una. Despite theological differences Abilene Christian University urged him to move back to Texas because of his ability to minister to troubled young people. At the same time the 70-member Belmont Church of Christ in Nashville, which was on the decline, asked him to come as their minister.

Finto was not interested at first. His prayer group had decided to buy a warehouse and start a church. But Belmont kept coming back. Finto was mystified why a traditional Church of Christ would call a minister who had created such a stir in their prominent college with his "blasphemous" ideas. But the church was desperate. Trying to be a traditional Church of Christ in a neighborhood of predominantly black families, elderly whites and foreign students, they were drying up.

Because of the stir created on campus, the vice president of the college called the church's 90-year-old treasurer and warned him against Finto. Matt Collins' reply was, "Now, boys, we've heard about all that, but we still believe he's our man."

Obviously the Belmont elders felt they could control Finto. What they didn't know was they could not control the Holy Spirit. Finto did accept the call and when he moved in, the Holy Spirit moved with him—along with hundreds of people who were hungry for God.

Only one of the original elders has sur-

vived the resulting shake-up, but the church has emerged to become the most powerful witness for Jesus and His Spirit on the Nashville scene. Not only that, but to scores of young (and not so young) ministers, Don Finto is regarded as a true apostle.

Ironically, it was not the gifts of the Spirit which became the Rubicon that Belmont Church crossed in its continuing struggle with the inflexible doctrine of the Church of Christ; rather it was the use of musical instruments which became the determining factor as to whether the hard core traditionalists could remain at Belmont or would have to seek fellowship elsewhere. Finto's dream of a fully



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worshipping church included instruments—a doctrinal decision he had reached in his own personal Bible study.

Yet he was slow in making changes, preferring to wait for the Holy Spirit to make His move first.

Young people by the hundreds were attracted to the smiling, soft-spoken college professor. Finto's own love of church music, flavored with his enthusiasm and freedom of walking in the Spirit, was infectious. As the young people came and began meeting in small groups, it was natural for them to worship with the snappy Jesus choruses. Of course the guitar, as the "official" instrument of Nashville, was present. No one among the Belmont "old guard" seemed to object, however, just as long as there was no use of musical instruments in the actual church worship service.

At the same time, Finto and some of his elders—especially the new ones who were now Spirit-filled—opened a Christian bookstore and coffee house called Koinonia across from the church building. Al Jaynes, Mamie Mason and George Andrews helped make up the guiding board. Koinonia began sponsoring Saturday night concerts both at the bookstore and in large auditoriums across the city. Young and old alike came by the thousands. It became a place where not only well-established Christian singing groups and soloists performed, but it was the springboard to launch many new ministries from Belmont into the national Christian music circuit.

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There were numerous conversions—especially kids out of the drug scene. It was an agonizing but growing transition for the traditional church. A number of the old Church of Christ people recognized the hand of God and were filled with the Holy Spirit. Others resisted, especially as non-Church of Christ people began flocking to the services. Many hard-liners in the Church of Christ adhered to the doctrine taught at the college that only members of the Church of Christ were actually saved. Meshing these newcomers into the Belmont membership was causing great tension.

Finally, at an elders' meeting in 1973, Finto, two elders, one deacon and another minister walked out in protest of "the treatment of brothers like second class citizens." Later, convinced of a spirit of division, Finto and the others repented of their hasty protest and ultimately the leadership opened to the

manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit—including tongues—in the service.

But the final flow for freedom came in the use of musical instruments in the church services. Brown Bannister, a gifted musical producer out of Abilene Christian University, had moved to Nashville. Bannister became active in Belmont Church and teamed up with another gifted musician, Chris Christian. They were working with young people, one of whom was a 15-year-old girl whose parents had been active in the Church of Christ but were now more open to the Spirit.

Her name was Amy Grant.

Amy was in Bannister's youth group

realized, to allow the Holy Spirit free rein.

In recalling those days Finto feels two things led to breaking the non-instrument barrier. One had to do with what was happening at Koinonia. Hundreds of young people were being baptized. Many of these were highly gifted musicians. To deny them the right to use their gift in worship services was sin, when the Bible clearly said that "everything which has breath" should praise the Lord, even using all kinds of musical instruments.

Finto also realized the Church of Christ had made their "no instrument doctrine" into an idol. It was time to bring it down.

The breaking of the non-instrument

month later Finto baptized him. Paxton, now one of Nashville's most talented musicians, has been instrumental in bringing numerous others to the Lord through his music and personal witness.

The "new" Belmont Church still meets in the same old building—except on Sunday morning when for reasons of space they are forced to meet in one of the city's junior high school auditoriums. The old church building simply cannot hold the 1,600 people who attend the services. At the same time the old church building still has the original shaped-note hymn books in its pew racks. However, they are seldom used since the old hymns are flashed on an overhead screen along with the hundreds of new songs which are being written.

Commenting on some of the new songs written by people like Mike Hudson (who was on staff at the church before going into full-time professional songwriting) and Michael W. Smith, Finto says: "The doctrine of these new songs is helping shape the theology of an entire generation—not only here at Belmont, but around the world."

Finto has a special mission to the Nashville musicians who are part of his flock. Once a month Finto and his wife open their home to all the musicians in the church for a time of fellowship and personal ministry. He views them as a separate group, much as a pastor might minister to a group of evangelists or missionaries who make regular trips away from the home church to minister.

On regular occasions Finto will fly to various parts of the nation to join up with a traveling group for the purpose of ministering to them for a few days. Just recently he joined Amy Grant and her troop for three days as they were making their way across the nation on a two-month tour. He spent the time counseling with the musicians and staff, encouraging them, leading them in Bible study and praying for them. Besides this he writes the musicians a monthly letter, encouraging them in their worship and praise, making certain they do not fall into bad theology or into the lifestyle of the world.

A recent newspaper article accused Belmont Church of being a "sect." "That's because we're no longer recognized as part of a legitimate denomination," Finto said.

But when one is in their midst, and listens to them worshipping, either a capella as they often do, or with "stringed instruments and harps," the only word which comes to mind is that this is a church fully alive.



The "new" Belmont Church still meets in the same old building, except on Sunday morning when 1,600 people attend services in a junior high auditorium.

when Chris Christian, who had heard her sing some of her own compositions, talked Word Records into producing an album. Shortly after that Finto asked her to sing in church one Sunday night.

Amy asked her father if it was all right to use her guitar to accompany herself as she sang. Her dad told her to clear it with an elder.

Fortunately Amy asked one of the Spirit-baptized elders who said, "Why not?"

That Sunday night, for the first time in the church's history, a musical instrument was used in the worship service as 15-year-old Amy Grant sang for the glory of God. Within a week an elders' meeting was called. The die had been cast. One of the men, protesting one could not be a Christian and use musical instruments in church, resigned. It was time, Finto

barrier opened the door for many others to enter the kingdom of God. One night, for instance, a grubby, drunken, heavy-smoking drug-user, wearing an old overcoat he had picked up from the Salvation Army, came down the street next to Belmont Church. He had been divorced several times and the woman he was living with was not his wife. Yet for some time, following the suicide of a friend, he had been reading a Bible seeking personal answers. But he had not found a church where he would be accepted.

That night he saw bare-footed young people, laughing and singing, entering the antiquated Belmont building. At the same time he spotted a middle-aged couple in formal evening clothes entering. He and the young woman he was with were so impressed they entered too.

Gary Paxton stayed at Belmont. One

CALVARY CHAPEL

COSTA MESA, CALIFORNIA

About the same time Don Finto was being used by the Holy Spirit to bring freedom to his branch of traditional Christianity in Tennessee, Chuck Smith was being singled out by God to touch the un-churched in the West.

In 1968 little Calvary Chapel, located on the border of Santa Ana and Costa Mesa in the sprawling section south of Los Angeles, had a typical cross-section congregation of 150. In 1970, however, more than 4,000 accepted Christ—most of whom Pastor Smith baptized in the Pacific Ocean. It was the beginning of the "Jesus Movement." Since then Chuck Smith has become spiritual father to hundreds of thousands and Calvary Chapel has spawned almost 200 other Calvary Chapels across the United States while becoming one of the largest and most talented churches in the nation.

Each week more than 25,000 people worship at the Costa Mesa church. The church's "Word for Today" duplicates and sends out more than 22,000 tapes every month to individuals all over the world in addition to the more than 100 radio stations which carry Smith's program.

Smith, who studied at Biola College and the American Baptist seminary at nearby Covina, is a Charismatic. However, on his insistence, speaking in tongues and healing are not emphasized in Sunday services. The gifts of the Spirit do flow at Wednesday evening believers' meetings and the Thursday night Afterglow following Smith's mid-week teaching.

Interestingly, however, it is not the "gifts of the Spirit" which seem to be the primary drawing card to Calvary Chapel as much as it is Smith's Bible teaching ability and the strong emphasis on music and worship by Smith and Charles Fromm of Maranatha Music, which began as a record company but has become Calvary's musical outreach.

Yet, like the rest of what has taken place at Calvary Chapel, the music program defies definition. The Sunday morning services which draw people by the thousands are basically traditional. Where Don Finto in Nashville was trying to break his Church of Christ followers out of the mold of dead tradition, Chuck Smith was determined to instill some meaningful traditional roots in



Pastor Chuck Smith addresses the combined Calvary Chapel fellowship in Costa Mesa, California. About 12,000 people attended the Easter sunrise service held in the Pacific Amphitheater.

his army of drifting Jesus people, thousands of whom had emerged from the drug culture.

Thus the Sunday morning meetings are composed of a few praise choruses, lots of traditional hymns from the hymn book (which Fromm refers to as the "devotional treasure of the church") and Smith's expository teaching of the Bible.

Sunday and Thursday evenings feature many choruses, often led by Smith who enjoys letting his deep, resonant baritone voice replace the traditional hand-waving technique he was taught at Biola. This section of the service will run about 40 minutes, non-stop, but without much repetition of singing the same songs over and over. Smith is in obvious control—as he is at every service he directs—but the overall feeling is informal and relaxed.

Nor is it the actual physical facilities which draw people. Smith's original ideal for a church was a small building which seated 300 people. But by 1974 when they completed their new sanctuary which could seat 2,300 people, it was filled at the first service with people sitting on the floor. After five weeks they had to go to triple services. Following that they built an overflow hall which seats an additional 700 and now they have to utilize closed circuit television.

The overall "feel" of the church

"campus" (for it does have a full Christian school with 1,300 students in grades kindergarten through eight) is both massive, busy, and at the same time, small scale. No building is more than two stories high. The sanctuary is low profile from the road, almost hard to see. No one has pretentious offices, including Smith. The appearance of bureaucracy is non-existent in contrast to other nearby "superchurches" such as Melodyland and the Crystal Cathedral with large neon signs and spectacular sanctuaries.

What draws the people then? One layman said, "The key spiritual office manifested is teaching. The church focuses on Chuck's high regard for the ministry of the Word and instruction in knowledge of the Word."

The other factor, obviously, is music.

As the Jesus people came pouring into Calvary Chapel in the early 1970s, they brought their music with them. Shortly after the revival started, a group of hippies came in and announced they were musicians. They had a rock group, they said, and testified the Lord had given them some Christian songs with Christian lyrics. They asked Smith for an opportunity to play and sing at Calvary Chapel.

Smith tells the story: "Since they had only been born again for a couple of weeks, I was a little dubious about the

THE Music OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

content of their lyrics. I requested, if possible, that they play some of the music first so I could hear it. They went out to their van and got their guitars, came in and began to play and sing. The music was so beautiful and touching that I began to weep. I asked them if they would play that evening. At the Monday night study, Love Song played their first Christian concert, and the young people there responded in a very enthusiastic way to this new style of Christian music."

Other groups began to form. Names such as Children of the Day, The Way, Gentle Faith, Country Faith, Kids' Praise and The Second Chapter of Acts were soon going out all over the nation in concert. The church was also spawning a large number of soloists such as Leon Patillo, Benny Hester and Chuck Girard.

The music was highly controversial, for many of these musicians were playing what was known as "Christian Rock," and all were using contemporary sound. It was the sound of the rock generation with the lyrics of the Bible. A lot of older folks were turned off—but young people by the millions were listening—and many were being saved. Many traditionalists, and even some Charismatics, accused Smith of being akin to the anti-Christ for his role in introducing Christian rock, but regardless of the accusations the music was obviously here to stay.

It was, indeed, a music revolution.

Smith saw the necessity of helping support the musicians in their ministry by making records. With \$3,500 and a four-track tape recorder, he formed a production company called Maranatha Music. This company produced the first Maranatha album, a sampler of all the groups, called *Maranatha 1*. It was an ambitious project, with even the name significant since it indicated there were more records to come.

There were. The first album was distributed from the trunk of Mike MacIntosh's car as he went around to the

bookstores in Southern California. It was an immediate success among young people, creating tremendous interest in contemporary Christian music. Soon other groups came into being and *Maranatha 2* and *Maranatha 3* were produced. Later Praise albums were added.

The heart of Calvary Chapel's music program, however, is not Maranatha, although that is the image it presents to the world. Rather it is Calvary's Community Worship Singers. Calvary had no choir during its early years since the church was filled with musical performers who were literally standing in line waiting to sing and play. The huge Saturday night concerts were drawing up to 5,000 each week (and still do). Therefore Smith saw no need to have a traditional choir.

After several years, however, it became evident there were a number of people who had experience in choral singing but could not find expression for it at Calvary. It was similar to the need

Don Finto saw among the Nashville musicians who were not allowed to use instruments in the church. Smith wanted to embrace these people and help them be fulfilled in their gifted areas.

A notice appeared in the bulletin. Seventy people turned out for the first meeting. This has now grown to 200 who not only rehearse and perform but also meet regularly in small groups for more intimate fellowship, recognizing that a true unity of the Spirit is needed to bring about the kind of musical blessing which seems to abound at Calvary.

The Community Worship Singers lead Sunday singing twice a month. Members are screened ahead of time, not so much for musical ability as for their reason for wanting to join the group. They sign up for only four months at a time with a renewable commitment. The short term is for those who join the community and realize later they cannot keep the disciplined commitments demanded.

Chuck Fromm, who pastors the Community Worship Singers, says the rehearsals major on relationships rather than note perfection.

"We need to be very careful," Fromm says, "that whenever we use music the focus is the message, not the methodology. Whenever we marry a method because of personal values, we risk cultural imposition and a greater sin.

"We follow the example of the Bible. Psalm 8 was written to glorify man as a creation of God. The instrument the

psalmist chose was from Gath, 'the city of the enemy.' To say that a drum is somehow an instrument of the devil is to label something good bad."

Fromm sees this as a spiritual battle. "We must keep the battle spiritual, not human. Remember, function should create form. We must not allow form to dictate function, although just changing form can also bring spiritual changes."

At the same time, the Saturday concerts continue although now they are aimed at the "surf culture," according to Fromm. Again they are controversial since they incorporate much of the "New Wave" sound.

This battle between tradition and freedom has been with Calvary Chapel from the beginning. Chuck Smith recalls the fall of 1969.

Our church was just moving into its new chapel, our beautiful new sanctuary that could seat 300. It had new wall-to-wall carpeting and padded pews. It was our dream chapel.


The man who sold us the carpet told us the worst thing you could do to a carpet is to allow bare feet to walk on it since bare feet emit a certain kind of oil that is very difficult to clean.

"Some members of the board could just picture their dream chapel being soiled by hippies with bare feet. So one person made a sign and placed it on the door. It read: 'No bare feet.'

As soon as I arrived for the church service and noticed the sign, I took it down. Then I called the men together and said we needed to keep our perspective straight. If the sign 'No bare feet' is going to keep a soul out of the church who needs to be here, then we should just take the carpet out. The entire group agreed."

Fromm, in talking about the battle between form and function, adds a footnote.

"The following week as Chuck was walking down the aisle toward the front of the church, he noticed a young barefooted hippie lounging in a pew with his big tow sticking up through the communion holder attached to the pew in front of him. He paused to say something but then shrugged his shoulders and decided, 'Well, it's the Lord's church anyway.'"

And Calvary Chapel remains just that—the Lord's Church. 

Jamie Buckingham is Charisma's editor-at-large. He was assisted in writing this article by Charisma's music critic, Richard Nakamoto, and by Christian journalists Paula Flautt in Nashville and Joel MacCollam in Los Angeles.