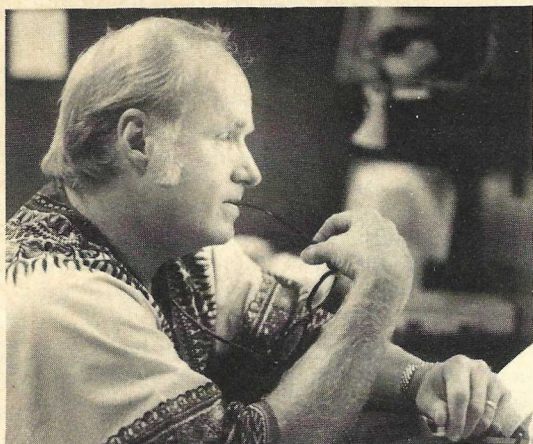


THE HEART OF THE MATTER



Jamie Buckingham, Melbourne, Florida: The writings, frequent national television appearances and speaking at conferences across the world have made the name of Jamie Buckingham a household word in many Christian circles.

Respected as a significant leader in the charismatic renewal, this former Southern Baptist pastor continues as the spiritual overseer of the Tabernacle Church in Melbourne, Fla.—a church making radical commitment to New Testament norms of church life and order.

jamie buckingham

Nobody ever uses our church down here in Florida as one of those “here’s-how-you-do-it” examples for church growth. Not that we haven’t grown. We have. We started with a burned-out pastor and a group of about fifty people meeting in a store front. Now, less than a dozen years later, more than 3,000 adults are looking to us for spiritual leadership.

But the problem is: we’ve broken all the rules.

For instance, the only bus we ever owned was a rusted-out hulk appropriately named “the holey roller.” It stopped running shortly after we bought it for \$150. We left it alongside the highway with a sign on the windshield that anyone who towed it away could have it.

We’ve never run an ad in the newspaper. We don’t invite powerful visiting preachers. We don’t sponsor a TV program. We don’t broadcast over the radio. The little sign on the main road simply says “Tabernacle” and has a little arrow pointing down the side street toward our concrete block building. We aren’t listed in the yellow pages and only this year did we open a church office.

We don’t have a thriving Sunday school. In fact, we only have accommodations for kids up through the sixth grade. Junior High and older join us in the “big church” for the two hour services. This forces the preacher to gear his remarks to a seventh-grade

level (which may be one of the reasons for our growth.)

Our church office is a little frame house. We don’t have plush carpets, just bare wooden floors; no walnut paneling, no piped-in music, no fancy dictating machinery. We’re not very impressive.

We don’t have a sign in front of the church with catchy slogans behind glass. People who drive in from out of town to attend the services have difficulty finding the church building because it’s located on a side street. However, since we’re not a Sunday-oriented or building-centered group—preferring to major on relationships in the home—building location has never been a prime factor.

For years we met in an abandoned child-care center, and finally were forced to move into a school which we used on Sunday. When our attendance continued to double we were forced to build a concrete block structure. No choir loft. No nave. Not even a vestibule. Just a cigar-box shaped building with twelve hundred metal chairs, an out-of-tune piano and a plexi-glass pulpit. But it was fun because we did it ourselves—without even the use of an architect.

As I said, we’re a poor example for a church growth brochure.

Tired of church fights and splits, we started with an intention to remain small. After the first year we stopped asking people to join (and have not

had an invitation for church membership in eleven years.) A year later we believed God was calling the Body of Christ into unity, and decided to do our part by painting out our denominational name on the sign—although we intended to remain a part of the denomination. Two months later the denomination painted us out. For some reason they did not want us if we had fellowship with those in doctrinal disagreement.

Someplace along the line we dissolved all our committees, dropped the idea of a budget, and stopped having church business meetings. We’ve never had a “revival” meeting, nor an “evangelistic service.” Opportunity is made in most of the services to confess Jesus Christ, but even here our methods are unorthodox. We ask those present who have accepted the Lord during the week—in a home meeting or through personal encounter—to stand at their seats and proclaim loud enough so all can hear: “Jesus Christ is my Lord.” That is always followed by a lot of applauding and people getting up and embracing. Sometimes as many as twenty people a service go through this little ritual—most of them introduced to Jesus by some friend sitting beside them.

As I said, we’re poor examples for church growth programs.

We’ve never held an enlargement campaign. We don’t have “pack-the-

pew" Sunday. (We don't even have pews.) We don't award perfect attendance pins in Sunday school and never paste yellow-construction-paper bananas on the lapels of visitors proclaiming "I'm one of the bunch." Like I say, we're poor examples.

What have we done? Well, not anything sensational that is worth an article in the Church Growth Journal.

Perhaps part of the secret is attitude. We were willing to remain small—so we've geared all our thinking toward family relationships. Building a community rather than a city. If the Lord wanted to add to the church, that was His business. Our business was to love those He sent around. Most of us had grown weary doing the work of God, and decided it was far better to *be*—than to *do*.

We're not against growth—even that which comes through programs. We rejoice over the work done by Jim Kennedy down the coast from us. He has an evangelism program which is not only working in that Presbyterian church—but is working all over the nation. We are thrilled when we hear of the tens of thousands flocking to Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. Bob Schuler and Rex Humbard have used TV in a marvelous way to build their cathedrals—one of glass and one of tomorrow. My good friend whom I greatly respect, Roy Harthern, has led Calvary Assembly in nearby Orlando to have the fastest-growing Sunday school in the nation for the second straight year. But none of this seemed to be "us". We were content to build slowly—not buildings but lives.

Oddly, however, this kind of thing seems to attract people. We've pulled in some of the top leadership in the nation to serve among our elders. Interestingly, nearly all of them were not only badly wounded by their churches, most were rejected as well. As we developed our "city of refuge" concepts, we found that many of those fleeing their persecutors had much to offer. So, we loved—and God has sent along the broken-hearted. Thousands of them.

As the group grew larger we realized we needed to form basic structures—and to call people into covenant commitment. But the more we required of people the more they came back—and brought their friends. Shepherds and sheep alike staggered into the fold, some strangled by dead legalism, others starved by watered-down liberalism, all desperate for a family who would correct without rejecting, love without judging.

Perhaps the finest kind of evangelism

is that kind done by a bartender who never had a course in soul-winning but tells his patrons about a God who loves—and a group of people who care. We never compromised the message, and eventually we found people's desires changing. Bartenders finally gave up their jobs. The topless dancers put on clothes and began singing songs for Jesus. We never insisted—we just loved and preached an uncompromising message—and left the results to the Holy Spirit. If they could stick it out they were welcome. No one was rejected.

Another secret probably lies in the idea that we see every member as a minister. Even though we don't have a formal membership, everyone who makes a commitment is commissioned to go out and minister. Especially is this expected of those in covenant relationship. As a result miracles happen—not so many in the services which are mostly worship and teaching—but in the daily ministry. School teachers pray for their children—and some are healed. Patients pray for their doctors, and some are saved. Parishioners witness to their priests, and some take time off from their services to come and worship with us—and sometimes wind up dancing before the Lord.

We are having fun. And maybe that's the greatest secret of all.

We've ordained a number of "lay pastors" who have pastoral responsibilities over the flocks meeting in their homes during the week. They marry, counsel and minister.

Our doctrine seems varied. But we've discovered men can never come together around doctrine, nor around tradition—only as they gather around the living Christ can they find unity. Some of our leaders believe in the "real presence"—some see the Holy Communion as merely symbolic. Some drink wine, some are teetotalers. Our prophets thunder repentance. Our pastors pour oil in wounds. But it's not an uncertain sound which goes out—unless you listen to only one instrument. In the plurality of elder leadership there is the sound of a symphony.

But we have no manual for church growth. It's a lot easier to let the Holy Spirit take control. He is the one who brings the balance between supernatural excitement and Christian maturity. And we're having a good time down here letting it all take place.

Unfortunately, no one will ever use us as one of those "here's-how-to-do-it" examples.

We break too many rules.



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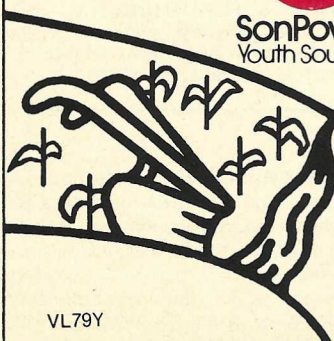
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