

California Fire

Heaven has invaded earth in Redding, California, where a sense of revival has been stirring Bethel Assembly for 10 years.

The desire for more of God runs deep in Bill Johnson's life. So deep that the veteran pastor has dedicated his life to fulfilling his personal convictions about the role a single church can play in reaching the world for Jesus.

"We believe it's possible for a church to change the world—to alter the course of history," Johnson states. "We live with that agenda."

The "agenda" he speaks of is more than a mere planning statement written on paper or a carefully worded creed spoken with emphasis on Sunday mornings. It is, for his congregation of some 1,500 members—the Bethel Assembly of God in Redding, California—an effort to win, and keep on winning, people to God.

"We think in terms of a 100-year vision, in terms of sowing into a generation we'll never see," Johnson told Charisma. "[Christianity] throughout its 2,000-year history has never had an increase from one generation to the next, as it pertains to revival. That's got to change."

To help bring about that change, Bethel—in Northern California about two hours from Sacramento—has transformed itself into what is increasingly being referred to today as an "apostolic resource center."

Whether the church's presence is felt in the sanctuary on Sunday or at the mall Monday, all its ministries are designed

to bring reformation—to equip believers from across the nation to carry God’s presence and power into their personal spheres of influence, and into the world.

The services, Sunday school activities and School of Supernatural Ministry all reflect a commitment to teach the upcoming generation how to receive an inheritance and how to build on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Johnson, in addition to his senior pastor duties, presides over a national network dedicated to global revival. He has written two books that reflect his passion for revival—When Heaven Invades Earth: A Practical Guide to a Life of Miracles and The Supernatural Power of the Transformed Mind—and is frequently asked to speak at conferences.

His growing national reputation is that of a gifted leader known for dispensing fatherly counsel to leaders who want to sustain the presence of God and extend His kingdom into the world through young and old alike.

‘Training for Reigning’

To visitors attending one of Bethel’s two Sunday morning services, the intergenerational influence is displayed clearly. Dozens of young adults line the side walls, and more drift to the front of the platform where they mingle with older adults and young children, their faces lifted in worship.

One young man, almost hidden behind the edge of the platform, worships through his ballet dance, conveying a sense of grace. At the front of the sanctuary, a middle-aged man waves an

exquisite flag of silk painted with the face of a lion in symbolic representation of God's strength.

A small child imitates the tall young man beside him who is leaping to the worship music. The youngster reveals a glimpse of the possibility of seeing God's dreams lived out more fully in a subsequent generation.

An old woman stands between two young women, their eyes closed and their hands raised in worship, the expressions on their faces the same—a testimony to how the love of God spans the ages and stages of life.

The evening service is altogether different. The intimacy of God's presence is almost tangible, and artists paint prophetically alongside the worship band. The atmosphere is charged with anticipation yet tempered by the assurance that God is present.

The place is full of young adults from the School of Supernatural Ministry. They are passionate about their encounters with Jesus, who, they testify, changes them, heals them, reveals their destiny and empowers their purpose.

According to Kris Vallotton, the school's overseer, the students are "in training for reigning"—and it is intensive.

First-year student Ben Kline, from the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Hood River, Oregon, explains: "I've received one revelation after another, and I can't really process it all at one time. I have to trust that my spirit catches it and that it will catch up with my head some other time."

Students in their first year receive much in the way of emotional healing and training in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The other students find themselves launching ministries or going on international outreaches characterized by demonstrations of God's healing power, where brushes with martyrdom become a distinct possibility.

One young woman, Vallotton says, witnessed a bus accident while overseas, stepped out of her vehicle and prayed for a man who instantly came back to life. Another young man from the school was held at gunpoint while in Peru. His response to the gunman was, "I have come here to die."

The small Hood River church has sent five young adults to attend the school this year, and their pastor, Denny Anderson, says the transformation in their lives is already evident.

"I have seen our young people challenged in every area of their personal lives," he says. "Those who have returned from previous schools have taken places of service in our church. They walk in a deeper level of maturity and understanding of the times in which we live."

Nathan Armerding, 20, attended the Bethel school last year. He is now involved in ministry at his home church in Oregon. He says the preparation he received stressed in part that ministry goes well beyond a local church's limitations.

"God could be calling you to the business world or to be a doctor," he points out. "Wherever your area of influence is, He wants you to release the kingdom of God, and you need to be able to be free to do that."

The Domino Effect

For Bethel the primary sphere of influence is Redding, where church members work actively to spread the kingdom of God. The city is their first ministry priority.

“God gave us a clear word that once one city falls there will be a domino effect across the nation,” Johnson told Charisma.

Strategy-filled sermons motivate staff and church members to release God’s love and presence into Redding schools and businesses until the whole city falls into the lap of their heavenly Father.

“It has to happen somewhere first,” Johnson maintains. “We just need to do our part to see that it happens here.

“We work to destroy the concept of ‘us and them’,” he adds, explaining that “everyone in the community is either Christian or pre-Christian. We’re here to be a blessing to the city, and we believe that the kindness of God leads to repentance. We live out of a sense of obligation that we owe them a divine encounter.”

As a result, Bethel members shopping at the local malls and drinking coffee in the local Starbucks are willing to boldly talk with strangers—offering them healing prayer and revelatory words, releasing the power of God to save.

Hundreds of people have been healed in public places—rather than just within the confines of the church building. Many physical healings have occurred in the local mall because

people from Bethel reach out to others while shopping.

“Our ambition is to take that atmosphere of heaven wherever we go, whether it’s into our homes, businesses, the streets, the mall—to take the reality of the abiding presence of God,” Johnson says. “You’ve got to function in power because that is the normal Christian life.”

Fuel for Revival

Becoming better acquainted with God’s power as the basis for normal Christian living has been a process for Johnson. He and his wife, Brenda, or “Beni,” started out in ministry as singles pastors under his father’s leadership at Bethel Church until they were sent to pastor a church in Weaverville.

A deeper transformation in his Christian life occurred when his Weaverville church experienced a visitation from God after Johnson attended a 1987 conference led by John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard church movement.

“A number of healings and manifestations broke out and I didn’t know what to do with it. I didn’t object to it, I wasn’t opposed to it; I just didn’t know how to pastor it in a way that it would continue and increase,” Johnson told Charisma.

Eventually, this experience led him to a crossroads. He had to decide which direction to take his church.

“In 1995 in Toronto I said, ‘Lord, if You touch me again I will never change the subject.’ So I went up for prayer every

time it was offered. I didn't have anything dramatic happen, but I came home and said, 'I am going to give the rest of my life to this.'"

In February 1996, after 17 years of leading the Weaverville church, the Johnsons were invited to become senior pastors of Bethel. Their three children are also staff ministers in local churches, either in Weaverville or at Bethel.

Today Johnson describes Bethel as a church where "everything we do either fuels revival or is fueled by revival."

That includes a concurrent focus on prayer and intercession through the ministry of Beni Johnson, as well as the addition of a separate 24-hour house of prayer called the Alabaster House.

"Out of intimacy [with God] intercession was birthed," Beni explains. "You find that place of intimacy and life flows out."

A gifted teacher in her own right, Beni also leads groups of intercessors to places in the city to pray over businesses for prosperity and breakthrough. The result is an evident economic increase in areas of the city they prayed over—areas that once were in decline.

An atmosphere of intimacy with God and honor for one another permeates the church. At times, God moves so dramatically through healings and heavenly phenomena that Bill stands transfixed.

One dramatic healing occurred last October. After several surgeries to correct disk injuries to her spine, Cheryl Haase, 60, was labeled by one doctor as “the worst pain case in the county.” Doctors could do nothing for her but insert a pump into her stomach that would administer pain medication directly to the spine and neck immobilized by two rods.

Haase eventually discovered that she was dying. Her body could no longer tolerate the pain or the medication. She heard that Bethel would be hosting revivalist Randy Clark’s healing school and asked her husband to take her.

“This time I came into the church in a wheelchair and I came out of it walking,” Haase told Charisma. “I felt the heat go down my spine and I walked the whole room. It stopped the whole conference.”

Bethel also has experienced some strange phenomena, including moments when feathers have fallen in the sanctuary and elsewhere. One feather landed in the car of a family who was moving to Redding. They had it analyzed by an ornithologist, who determined it likely came from the breast of a dove.

Gusts of wind have blown through the services when doors were closed. People in the prayer house have heard angels singing or cheering. Children have seen gold dust appear on their hands.

One man discovered a small chunk of gold on his cheek. When he had it analyzed, it was determined to be a pure form of gold with an unknown oil in it.

“These phenomena are evidences that His world is breaking into

ours,” Johnson explains. “The open heaven is the inheritance of the believer.”

Leading With Relationships

Johnson’s views about “the open heaven” and sustaining “a culture of revival” draw many leaders who want to become affiliated with his ministry. “We have people constantly wanting to relate to us and asking for our covering. We say, ‘Relationships take time,’” Johnson says.

Randy Clark, who is credited with sparking the Toronto Blessing revival of the 1990s, recently brought his Apostolic Network of Global Awakening—churches that partner with him for international revival—under Johnson’s leadership.

“I believe that Bill Johnson will be known as the most significant teacher in church history in the next 25 years,” Clark told Charisma. “Bill carries the message of John Wimber to its logical conclusion.”

Anderson of Hood River Vineyard agrees. “I believe that Bill carries the same message to the church that John Wimber did,” he says. “It is a call to a reformation of our church culture and to the way we think about the King and His kingdom.

“We have seen dramatic increases in salvations, healings and the manifest presence of God in our midst,” he adds. “Our fellowship has grasped, with increasing vigor, the passion to minister in the community. Our entire church culture is in the process of being reformed.”

To assist others in keeping a move of God sustainable, Bethel offers ministry resources designed to strengthen personal gifts and callings. There is a school of business for supernatural marketplace ministry and a Strategic Planning workshop that is offered six times a year.

The staff also hosts leadership training in May and November. Most who attend receive a great deal of personal and prophetic ministry, and testimonies of physical healing are common.

Participants in Bethel workshops and conferences ultimately discover the secret behind the church's success and favor within the community.

"It's tremendous for others to see the honor our staff has for one another—we live in a culture of honor," Johnson explains. "What makes it work is that we are not afraid to confront sin. And we work hard to call out people's destinies."

A preferential honoring of one another, based on Romans 12:10, leads staff members to defer to others' gifts and develops a relational structure that creates comrades rather than competitors.

This practice extends to Redding, where Bethel's financial resources are shared routinely with other churches to help ensure their success. On behalf of the church, a monthly gift is given to the local Native American tribe to honor them as the original owners of the land.

"We literally give ourselves away that others are blessed," Johnson says. "We cannot come into all that God has for us if our brothers and sisters are not equally blessed."

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