

Ignite the Fire

Bill and Brenda Johnson have one goal—revival. They're seeing it happen in their California church and beyond.

The year was 1987. Bill Johnson was listening to Vineyard Churches founder John Wimber preach a sermon that he'd heard before—because he had taught it himself. But as he sat there, he grew discouraged because the message hadn't produced the same fruit in his own life and congregation. "It was apparent that I could no longer expect good things to happen simply because I believed they could ... or even should," Johnson writes in his book *When Heaven Invades Earth*. "There was a risk factor I had failed to enter into—Wimber called it faith." A seasoned fifth-generation pastor, Johnson began to partner his teaching with action. His California congregation prayed for the sick and saw miracles. But soon, discouragement set in again. Some weren't healed. It was at that time, during a 1995 visit to the Toronto Airport Vineyard church—where the "Toronto Blessing" revival was occurring—that Johnson says he promised God if He touched him again he would make the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the sole purpose of his existence.

Today he and his wife, Brenda "Beni" Johnson, have their sights set on one goal—to see revival happen in the United States in their lifetimes.

"We're alive for one reason—the outpouring of the Spirit of God on everything He's given our hands to touch—family, city, my nation and the nations of the world," he says. "We've not been assigned to hang out until He returns—we've been given a message and a power that completely revolutionizes life. Why would anyone want to get up in the morning and not shape the course of world history?"

Becoming comfortable with God's power as the basis for normal Christian living has been a process for the Johnsons, however. They started out in ministry as singles pastors under Bill's father's leadership at Bethel Church in Redding, California, about 200 miles north of San Francisco, until they were sent to pastor a church in Weaverville, 45 miles farther to the northwest.

A deeper transformation in Bill's Christian life occurred before his visit to Toronto. His Weaverville church experienced a visitation from God after he attended a 1987 conference led by Wimber.

"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," Bill 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 the senior pastors of Bethel.

Today Bill describes Bethel as a church where “everything we do either fuels revival or is fueled by revival.” They and their 1,500 members are pioneering a quest to build what they call a “revival culture” in America.

“Revival is not a series of meetings ... not a shot in the arm to bring a boost of evangelism in the church,” he explains. “It’s to be a way of life. It’s the activity of the Spirit of God and people of God to bring transformation to their surroundings. A culture is a system of beliefs, disciplines, practices, boundaries—those things that help sustain the move.”

Adds Beni: “As a corporate church, we’ve cried out all over the world for revival. We [at Bethel] joke and say, ‘Why don’t we just have one?’ We’ve petitioned God all this time for revival, and so let’s act it out and do it.

“It’s revival culture—prophetic, healing, deliverance, prayer. How do you do it? You walk it out.”

‘Revival Culture’

The way the Johnsons and their church “walk it out” is documented largely in the testimonies shared during Bethel Church services, where parishioners as well as students from the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry eagerly testify of the miracles God performed that week as they endeavored to bring supernatural power into the natural events of everyday life.

At Bethel, Christians of all ages are taught to expect God to speak to them about the needs of the people around them as

they go about their normal routines of life—shopping, pumping gas, attending school, parking the car or going to work.

Bill told Charisma of church members who had been used by God in a variety of supernatural ways, such as praying with a stranger on a street corner and seeing him healed of knee pain, believing with a visitor to a Bethel service to supernaturally receive a new kneecap and seeing the prayer answered, and seeing an elderly woman in a department store healed and able to walk freely without the leg brace she had been wearing.

On occasion, people from the streets seek out the church in Redding where miracles happen, such as the gang leader from a Northern California city who came to the church seeking prayer. “He was completely healed of colon cancer,” Bill says. “Now the gang leaders are getting saved in his city.”

The Johnsons believe that part of creating a revival culture is releasing church members who will serve as volunteers or interns in the Redding community.

“We have impact on what goes on in public schools,” Bill says. “We go in to serve, not rule. We don’t go in to kick out bad teachers and give them a new curriculum.

“We want them to succeed in what they are assigned to do. If you go in to serve, you become empowered to impart.”

Bethel members are involved as volunteers in after-school programs, tutoring and serving as chaplains in the hospital systems. Pastors are invited by the public school system to mentor parents of rebellious children and teenagers.

“We go in to partner with them,” Bill explains. “We get into business, education and political systems.

“You have people called to serve, not to dominate. You get to pray for their sick, help their marriages, pray for their drug-addict child, and get in next to hurting people who don’t have access to answers.”

A Supernatural Education

Beni Johnson is one of many Bethel leaders who teaches 450 students, ages 15 to 85, who are enrolled in the church’s School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM). When she teaches about prayer, she takes her classroom to the streets.

“We do it,” she says of their proactive approach to ministering. “We are releasers. We run into people who need healing, and so we release healing.

“When you keep it within the walls, it dies. When you take it out where Jesus intended it to be, it happens.”

At least three times a week, students go to the local streets, malls and schools to serve community leaders and bring heaven to earth.

Beni told Charisma of one student who traveled to a local scenic bridge after feeling impressed by the Holy Spirit that someone in the area who was wearing a red shirt was experiencing knee pain. There, the female student met a 31-year-old man in a red shirt who told her he used to mountain-

bike 60 miles a day until an accident left his knee injured.

Beni related to Charisma that the student told the man, "God told me the word of knowledge just to show you that He knows everything about you," and that after she prayed for the man he not only was healed but also born again.

BSSM students have prayed for strangers' healing in grocery stores, for a shopper whose daughter was in prison, for a cashier who was healed of back pain and able to twist and bend without pain, and for many others.

The students aren't the only ones testifying, however. Bethel pastors Joaquin Evans and Chris Overstreet were looking for more than a good burger when they saw a senior couple at a table in a fast-food restaurant and felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to talk with them.

"Can I pray with you for anything?" Evans asked the couple.

The wife said she had muscular dystrophy, so the pastors and some BSSM students who were in the restaurant prayed for her. According to the pastors, she stood up and walked—at first faltering.

Her legs straightened within minutes, and she walked back and forth in the restaurant exclaiming, "I can't do this!" One week later, she was still walking and had been healed of muscular dystrophy, the pastors said.

Leaders at Bethel Church and School of Supernatural Ministry strive to create an environment where students and

parishioners alike are free to experiment with new methods and styles of reaching people for Christ—methods that sometimes simply do not work.

“We have a lifestyle that requires people to live with a measure of risk,” Bill points out.

“If you can create an atmosphere where ‘misses’ are learning experiences and not shameful,” he explains, “then warriors will feel safe to come and experiment and not be rejected when it doesn’t work.”

When failures occur, the Johnsons are determined to go to their knees and ask for God’s help as they continue to move forward. After they made a statement that Redding would be “a cancer-free zone,” someone died of the disease.

“You’re going to have failures,” Beni says. “We don’t try to figure out the answers. We’re seeing major breakthrough, and we just keep at it.”

“We fail a lot in ... our effort to get breakthrough,” Bill adds. “We have to experiment.

“The way ‘experimenting’ works for us is, we stay deeply accountable so that in our lifestyle of risk we don’t become independent and arrogant. When people succeed, we applaud. When they fail, we pick them up.”

Meanwhile, the revival momentum is building in Redding, though Bill believes that the revival culture in his church is not yet fully developed. He visited Argentina to see if the

revival occurring among churches there is similar to that in Redding.

“Their revival is like a big, ripe, red apple,” Johnson says. “I came back realizing ours is 100 percent apple but not fully developed yet. Everything is there [at Bethel]. It’s just smaller.”

The Revival Stigma

When it comes to being a steward of revival, Johnson says that if people deny what God has already started, it can kill what is growing—in Bethel’s case, for example, the metaphorical “smaller apple.” He believes that the body of Christ today often prays for revival while not believing it’s knocking on the door.

He compares the situation to the account in Acts 12:12-16 when Peter was knocking on the door of a house while the Christians inside ignored his knock and kept praying for his release from prison—not believing he was already out, standing at their door.

“[Revival is] happening,” Johnson says. “It’s just on a small scale. People are asking for something to happen that’s already been released, and you have to cooperate with what He’s already given.”

In order for Christians to sustain a revival, they must be willing to adjust their lifestyles even if their friends and family members are offended, Bill teaches. People must love God above all other relationships, he says, because revival carries a stigma.

"Our closest friends won't buy into what God's doing in our life," he admits. "If we're going to carry what God's asked for, we have to pass that test—the stigma is the important part of the test.

"John 5:44 says, 'How can you believe when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?' Fear of man puts up an image of walking in wisdom. People who walk in the fear of man are cautious people and people call them wise. The fear of man masquerades as wisdom."

He views Jesus' mother as the shining example of someone who honored God while wise and cautious people around her failed to understand the call that God had placed on her life.

"Mary had the stigma of carrying an illegitimate child, all her life," he says. "Not even the ones who loved her and knew her the most believed [the child] was from God. That's what it means to carry revival.

"Revival almost always has a stigma—something offensive that causes people to reject it when it comes. People don't realize that when God manifests revival bugs are drawn to the light, and if you don't like dealing with stuff like that then you don't have a revival from God.

"In revival, everything gets brought to the surface ... good, bad and ugly. Everything is open so that people are in a position to deal with what's been in their hearts.

"I've watched this for years. God will bypass people who are

praying for revival and land on a couple who wasn't even interested. He knows they'll steward it.

"People have a religious agenda they want revival to fit into. ... [God] has agendas that are different than ours. God brought joy to people who didn't deserve it in Toronto. It still bothers people. People who don't adjust to that will miss out."

Sharing It Freely

The Johnsons aren't interested in urging the masses to join their church. Instead they seek to train and serve outside churches that have a similar vision. Bethel members voted in January 2006 to withdraw their affiliation with the Assemblies of God so they could cross denominational lines to serve a growing number of churches that have partnered with them in structuring a revival culture.

In an attempt to give away what God's given to Bethel Church, the Johnsons and their staff travel frequently, nationally and internationally. The pastoral staff also hosts small schools in Redding such as School of Supernatural Worship, School of the Prophets, School of Transformation and, this year, a new School of the Arts (see).

These schools last a few weeks so that laymen and leaders alike can receive training in areas pertaining to their particular bend in the body of Christ.

Bethel also has a ministry base in La Paz, Mexico, where leaders sent out from Redding work with third-year intern students from BSSM to assist four local churches and train

people in the supernatural lifestyle of revival culture.

“We try to give everything away,” Bill says. “Part of it is that we know if we give away what we have, we’ll get more and increase our capacity. That’s part of our assignment.”

“We’re strongly focused on equipping so we make events to train. We design things around the format of training, releasing and empowering people.”

“Churches now come to us with the stories,” Beni adds. “When we get off the plane, they’re telling us things that are happening. It’s fun to see.”

The Johnsons believe all those living today were born to shape the course of world history—one person, one city, one church at a time.

“Everyone breathing is a part of one generation,” Bill says. “I look for people with fire in their eyes and pour myself into them. I have one life, and I’m going to give the whole deal.”

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Training children to be used by God is a major part of the Bethel Church 'revival culture.'

Children's classrooms at Bethel Church and Bethel Christian School are practice rooms for the supernatural. Children learn to pray for the sick by assigning one child to pretend he is sick and another to practice praying for the sick child. Deborah Reed, who oversees the spiritual development of children's ministries at Bethel Church, describes the training for "raising the dead."

"We wrap one child in toilet paper like he's dead, and a mummy. We pretend and say: 'Oh, he died. Oh, no! What do we do, kids?'" During a class, after Reed asked the children what to do about the person who "died," they exclaimed, "We pray!"

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One child said, "Joe, I command your spirit to come back into your body." Nothing happened.

Reed asked the children a second time, "What do we do now?"

"Pray again!" they exclaimed in unison. They prayed again, the toilet paper wiggled, kids screamed, and Joe came to life.

Says Reed: "My heart is to expose to all the generations the value and the treasure right under our noses. Who's living in your house?"

"[In the Old Testament] Jesse was told that Samuel would anoint one of his sons ... and he didn't even invite David to the dinner. That's how far out of touch he was with the greatness of his own children."

Reed has taken dozens of international trips to lead children and their adult leaders in revival. During one trip, the pastor's wife was speaking with Reed about children's ministry when God gave Reed a vision of a white board with numbers scattered everywhere, written in no particular order.

Says Reed: "God spoke to me, 'Deborah, if we trained children in their numbers in a haphazard fashion, out of sequence, in a lifetime they would never be proficient in math. They can't learn unless we teach them systematically.'"

Inspired by the vision, Reed spent the next 2-1/2 weeks writing a 52-week curriculum for children, covering salvation, baptism, communion, worship, character development, healing, prophecy, and the fruits and gifts of the Spirit.

Don Mayer, principal of Bethel Christian School, says the students choose the direction of prayer and worship during chapel each week. During one of the recent chapel meeting, the students reported seeing an estimated 50 feathers fall as they worshiped. They saved some of the feathers to place on a bulletin board as a reminder of what God did in chapel.

Says Mayer: "They're stepping out into true ministry. " At nursing homes, for example, kids pray over the sick, prophesy and speak a blessing using words of knowledge, he says.

"We must take responsibility for what we've been given," he adds. "God said we're training sons and daughters of the Most High."

Praying: The First Step to Ministering

Prayer plays a vital role at Bethel Church, turning members' everyday tasks into life-changing moments.

When God told Brenda "Beni" Johnson 12 years ago that He wanted her to have joy in her intercession, she thought it was impossible.

"In the church where I grew up there were a lot of depressed intercessors," Johnson says. "I didn't want to live in that environment. I wanted to understand the heartbeat of heaven—the way I do that is 'soaking prayer.'"

Johnson describes "soaking prayer" as "not asking for anything [from God]. It's all about your spirit and His Spirit communing. It's through quietness we hear God."

It has made her communion with God joyful, and it's something she requires of her third-year students at Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry.

"They have to do soaking prayer if they're going to be my intern," Johnson says. "We teach revival culture—prophetic, healing, deliverance, prayer—how [to] do it. And we walk it out.

"The students are on the streets three times a week serving the community—they're out there doing it. When they graduate and go home, they do it at home."

Johnson admits she doesn't have all the answers about prayer, but she's not afraid to experiment with new strategies.

She says that in 2004 a young man who was a major drug dealer came to her with information about the drug trade in the Redding area. Johnson learned that the Greek word pharmakeia in the Bible can refer to “drug” and is further defined as “sorcery.” What resulted was an unusual form of spiritual warfare to combat the flow of drugs in the region.

“We discovered there is a sound in the shofar that breaks things and releases things in the spirit realm. I felt like I was to go up on the Oregon-California border at sunrise and blow the shofar. I called a friend, and we drove up before sunrise and blew the shofar. The Lord said, ‘Repent for allowing a sorcery spirit into your state.’”

Within a week, Johnson says, newspapers in local counties reported drug busts almost daily. “We knew we had really hit the mark. A lot of what we do in intercession are prophetic acts like that.”

Bethel also joined a prayer experiment with other area churches. The Rev. Jim Wilson, head of PrayNorthstate, led 12 churches to pray from February 2006 to April 2006, asking God to reduce the number of youth deaths in Shasta County to half what they were during the same period of 2005.

Says Wilson: “In those three months of 2006, compared to the same three months the year before, Shasta County youth deaths were cut in half.”

Meanwhile, Bethel seeks to be used by God in the everyday events of life. Recently, someone stopped Johnson and asked to be involved in the Bethel “mall ministry.”

“We don’t have a mall ministry; we just have people who shop,” Johnson chuckles. “They go to shop and people get healed. We go about natural things and see the supernatural happen.”