

Toronto Blessing Celebrates 10 Years

Leaders say the laughing has stopped, but the unique revival movement is still going strong

On Jan. 20, 1994, the worldwide “awakening” known as the Toronto Blessing ignited in a small Mississauga, Ontario, church near Toronto’s international airport. Ten years later, there is scant evidence among believers that enthusiasm for the movement is waning.

In October approximately 3,500 people made the pilgrimage to the church where it all began—Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF, formerly known as Toronto Airport Vineyard)—to participate in the 10th annual Catch the Fire conference.

They journeyed from across North America and from as far away as Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and South America to the 70,000-square-foot building that now houses TACF. Spokespeople estimate more than half of those present were first-time attendees.

Some came out of curiosity. Some came to fellowship with other believers; some to participate in exuberant worship and to hear speakers such as John and Carol Arnott, Heidi Baker, Mike Bickle, Wesley and Stacey Campbell, Randy Clark and Joseph Garlington. But most said they came hoping to receive a touch from God, and to experience the Toronto Blessing for themselves.

“The Toronto Blessing” is a phrase coined by British

journalists to describe what movement insiders say is an incredible outpouring of the Holy Spirit marked by unusual physical manifestations among believers. It began in Toronto and quickly spread. TACF senior pastor John Arnott told Charisma that the Catch the Fire conference in 1994 was "catalytic in spreading the fire of God around the world."

Ministry leaders from all corners of the earth came to that first October conference. "They were shocked by the intensity of what happened to them," Arnott said. "It launched them into a whole new dimension of ministry."

Those who came to Catch the Fire 10 Years On hoping to witness or share in similarly shocking experiences weren't disappointed. Attendees and speakers alike participated enthusiastically in the partylike atmosphere. Countless individuals could be seen jerking spastically, laughing, shaking, weaving drunkenly or falling backward into the arms of catchers.

Keith Luker from Forth Worth, Texas, was one of them. Luker was at Catch the Fire '94. He remembered it took several days before he felt anything, then he "felt everything: shaking, fire, feeling God's love, tears."

"It totally changed my life," he added. "Reading my Bible, worship—it's almost like the difference between black-and-white and color."

He was eager to return for the 10th conference. The first afternoon, Arnott invited Luker to the platform. Receiving prayer, Luker began to shake and then crumbled to the floor, where the shaking continued for several minutes.

“To me, physical manifestations are just an indication that there’s something supernatural at work in that human,” said Dr. Grant Mullen, a mental-health physician long associated with TACF. “These are strictly human reactions to the presence of a supernatural force,” he added.

But not all charismatics accept that force as originating with God, and in the last decade the movement has had its share of critics. In December 1995 the Toronto Airport church was formally expelled from the Association of Vineyard Churches, a move that was symptomatic of conflicts occurring in many churches touched by the revival. Arnott said it happened, in part, because [Vineyard leader] John Wimber “didn’t like the way we managed [things].”

Others raised different concerns. Kevin Reeves left his Haines, Alaska, “Toronto/Latter Rain” church in 2000, after five years as a teaching elder, and today describes himself as “very conservatively Pentecostal.”

He read an article in which New York pastor David Wilkerson criticized the Toronto movement. “So I thought, If David Wilkerson can question these things, certainly I can.”

Reeves said his questions were not welcomed in his church. “I wanted to open a Bible, and all everybody was talking about was their experience,” he remembered. “The biblical reference is the only written record we have of God’s interaction with man. If you cannot find any kind of parameter within the Scriptures that you are operating within, you are operating outside. It’s very cut and dried.”

Supporters insist that the Blessing has affected millions of

lives. Randy Clark is credited with being the man who brought the Blessing to Toronto in 1994. He told Charisma that in his opinion, three of the “greatest fruits” of the movement are “the miracle of the revival in Mozambique”—where Toronto alumni Rolland and Heidi Baker have helped start more than 5,000 churches—“the miracle of the number of Muslims that are being saved” and “the spreading of the fire around the world.”

Arnott said the most significant result of the Toronto Blessing can be seen in “an expectation in the hearts of many Christians now that when they go to church, something should happen,” he said. “There’s a greater expectation that the presence of God should be felt and experienced in some way.”

TACF meetings continue to be held each Tuesday through Sunday, just as they have been since the movement began. But 10 years ago, laughter dominated the meetings. Today, that’s no longer true.

“One of the misconceptions I hear from people is they think, Oh well, the laughing’s over,” TACF associate pastor Steve Long said. “And that’s true. The laughing is over. However, things are just as powerful, just as anointed.”

Today, average attendance at weeknight meetings varies from 100 to 500. But the format of some services is different.

“The Holy Spirit has been taking us ... on a journey,” Long said. TACF now holds weekly “Soaking” and “Seek His Face” nights, which feature quiet ministry by the worship and prayer teams. Speakers are scheduled for Thursday through Sunday meetings only.

What the future holds for the Toronto Blessing remains to be seen. But Arnott has a few ideas. In 2002, the Arnotts began Catch the Fire Ministries, which includes a TV ministry and a vision for establishing 10,000 “Soaking Prayer Centres” worldwide.

“Revivals tend to have a life of 20 to 30 years,” Arnott says, “so we’ve really only just begun, haven’t we?”

Patricia L. Paddey in Toronto