

A Journey Toward Healing

After a difficult public divorce, Melva Lea—former wife of Larry Lea—is starting over with a fresh understanding of God’s ability to restore.

Although she has experienced personal tragedy during the last decade, Melva Lea shows no visible signs of battle scars. Her countenance is free of bitterness and pain, and she walks with confidence and excitement.

“The devil won a battle—but he’s not winning the war,” says the vivacious 51-year-old, who recently released her first CD, *Oh, How I Love Him*.

Today, Melva is helping her son, John, plant Life Church in Rockwall, Texas—the Dallas suburb where she and her former husband, Larry Lea, began Church on the Rock in 1980.

For now, Life Church meets at a local middle school. Melva teaches an adult Sunday school class and is putting together the children’s ministry. She hopes to minister also to people who are suffering, drawing on the lessons she says she has learned firsthand.

“I want people to know that the depths of grace that healed me and the depths of prayer it took to help break me through are available to them,” she says.

Melva says she has never doubted God’s ability to heal and that she has seen His love in action all her life. She grew up in a stable Baptist home in Jacksonville, Arkansas, a small town outside Little Rock. Her dad was a letter carrier, and her mom worked in the office at a local school. In the late 1960s Melva attended Dallas Baptist University, where she met Larry Lea.

After they married in May 1972 Larry became youth pastor at

Beverly Hills Baptist in Dallas—one of the first Baptist churches involved in the charismatic movement. A year after his arrival the youth group had exploded from 40 to 1,000. Melva suddenly found herself ministering to young people who were involved in the drug culture and yet searching for spiritual answers.

In 1979 Larry and Melva moved with their three children to Kilgore, Texas, and Larry became an itinerant speaker for 18 months. While in Kilgore, Melva says, God gave Larry a special prayer message that, in time, would become widely circulated.

Melva says God spoke to Larry in 1980 about moving to Rockwall to establish Church on the Rock. He answered the call, and they began the church with about a dozen people.

During the height of their ministry in the mid-1980s, the home church had 5,000 in attendance, and thousands of people flocked to the three other churches Larry had planted in other parts of Dallas.

Larry wrote *Could You Not Tarry One Hour?* in 1986, and it quickly became a best seller. Within a few years, he had raised up and registered 370,000 prayer warriors who believed in his prayer message.

In November 1991—about a year after the Leas left Church on the Rock to focus on international ministry—Larry publicly came under fire. On ABC-TV's *PrimeTime Live*, co-host Diane Sawyer grilled Larry about his TV fund-raising appeals and the homes he owned, among other issues.

Although Larry attempted to make things right after the exposé, says Melva, the stressful events set in motion by the television interview led him into a deep depression that he couldn't seem to shake. Things went from bad to worse.

"In the beginning I naively thought life was all about trying to live right, and nothing bad would happen," she says.

Instead, she discovered that life can take unexpected turns.

In the Q-and-A that follows, Melva talks candidly with Charisma about some of her trials and how the Lord has helped her heal and rebuild.

Charisma: What was your personal reaction to ABC's PrimeTime Live exposé involving your former husband, Larry Lea, in 1991?

Lea: I was devastated. Before Larry did the interview, ABC told him that many people considered him to be the next Billy Graham and that the interview was going to be about "the new generation of preachers." When he got to the studio, they completely changed the angle. From Diane Sawyer's first word, the air just went out of the room. It was horrific.

We later were contacted by a senator who told us that the program was an ambush for a political agenda—to take down a huge voting block of right-wing conservative voters.

Charisma: How did friends and church members respond?

Lea: We were living in Tulsa [Oklahoma] when the interview aired. Church members [from Church on the Rock] and friends were wonderful. What was devastating to me was that so many people in the body of Christ believed what they heard from a secular news reporter rather than believing someone who taught them how to pray and commune with God. For the most part everyone looked at us like we had leprosy.

After the interview we formed a committee of pastors to examine our practices. We invited EFICOM [Ethics and Financial Integrity Commission, a branch of the National Religious Broadcasters that certifies financial accountability] to come in and look at everything. One EFICOM member, who was a federal judge and clearly didn't like Larry, told him, "If I find anything wrong, you're in trouble."

Larry opened up everything to him. A few days later this man

returned and said: "You have grounds to sue. There is absolutely nothing true about any of [ABC's] allegations."

Perception is everything, though. The damage had already been done. It destroyed our credibility.

Charisma: Were your children aware of the interview?

Lea: We knew it was going to air and it was going to be ugly. We were ministering in Florida and told the children not to watch it. Of course, they did. We were living in the compound at Oral Roberts University at the time.

As soon as the program was over, the phone rang. It was Richard Roberts. He told the kids, "You all come over right now."

They did, and he and his wife, Lindsay, loved on all three of our kids. [Richard] assured them: "You all will live through this. My father has been criticized for years and years, and my family has suffered through all of it. I'm still alive, and you'll be alive, too."

I've never been so grateful.

Charisma: It seems that Larry wanted to make things right. Why didn't things turn around for the better?

Lea: Things started to spiral because Larry went into a deep depression. While in Tulsa, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which can be triggered by stress. Unfortunately, medication was inadequate to deal with the problem.

Though Larry was very depressed, we would get him dressed, and he would get on a plane and go preach. Whenever he would stand up in the pulpit, the anointing would be there, and he would preach like a man from another world.

Charisma: Were you concerned that he was in the pulpit at that

point?

Lea: We didn't know anything but ministry, and it was the only thing that gave him life.

Charisma: Looking back on it now, do you wish someone had encouraged him to take time out for healing and restoration?

Lea: At that time I don't think it would have made any difference, because very few people—even those in the medical profession—understood bipolar disorder. But now in the charismatic church we need some kind of plan for restoration because we don't do it very well.

The thing about the ministry is, it's difficult for a wife or husband who is having trouble to ask for help. Who are they going to go to? They can't go to their congregation, and unfortunately the friendship level among leadership isn't always trustworthy. You tell someone you're in trouble, and it's going to go all over the world.

Charisma: Why did you move to San Diego in 1994?

Lea: Larry got a call from a pastor there who was ready to retire and asked him to come and take the church.

Charisma: When you arrived in San Diego, how was your marriage?

Lea: It was hurting. Larry had just been through a major nervous breakdown, and we were both totally spent.

By the time we moved to California the bipolar condition had swung to the opposite extreme—moving from a “fetal” position to a “grandiosity” position. On this end of the spectrum a bipolar individual's conscience is weakened. Their behavior can be horribly destructive.

It took a while to get the right professional help and medication, and by then negative patterns were already

established. Bipolar disorder is no excuse for sin—but people without this disorder don't usually go to these extremes.

On the other hand, if you look at it from the spiritual side, any individual who would impact the body of Christ with such a deep message is a real target for the enemy.

Charisma: You and Larry were in marital counseling for several years. Why wasn't it successful?

Lea: Larry had met someone else, and his heart was divided. We moved back to Texas in 1998. I really thought it might help, but it didn't.

Charisma: It seems that his teaching on prayer would have affected his own life more deeply.

Lea: Actually, I believe what he learned to appropriate in prayer saved his life. The revelation that the Lord gave him on prayer was the only thing that gave him any sense of sanity or stability.

Charisma: Larry soon filed for divorce, and in April 1999 it was officially over. How did you feel?

Lea: The summer after our divorce I thought I was going to die. I had hoped that Larry and I might get back together—but shortly thereafter he remarried.

Charisma: Who stood by your side?

Lea: I had some wonderful friends who didn't budge and [who] saved my life. What's amazing is that the Lord took me right through this healing process in about six months. Those around me knew it was real; the work was so thorough. I was able to deal with my own issues, forgive and genuinely love.

Charisma: During this crisis what did you do to occupy your time?

Lea: During the divorce, I went to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth and studied counseling. After the divorce pastor Benny Hinn called and asked if I would like to sing for his crusades. He graciously gave me the opportunity to travel with his ministry for over a year.

The opportunity to minister in that arena again was tremendously healing. To be in that anointing was life itself.

Simultaneously, I began an intensive study of the book of John. The revelation of Jesus during this time was the most profound experience of my life.

Charisma: What is your personal feeling about divorce?

Lea: I hate it. It is terribly destructive for everyone involved. But my greatest source of grief was knowing the negative impact this would have on the body of Christ.

I was absolutely, totally against our divorce. I loved Larry. I did not want it and did everything I knew to keep it from occurring. It's one of the few things in Scripture God says He hates.

It doesn't mean Larry and I aren't compassionate and kind toward one another or the children. Our lives are being redeemed. It doesn't mean Jesus isn't a great Redeemer or that He won't redeem your life from destruction. But there is a huge cost, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Charisma: Why are there so many divorces among Christian leaders?

Lea: I don't know what's going on in the whole body of Christ, so let's just talk about the charismatic movement.

It was birthed in the middle of the Vietnam-hippie era. Some of that attitude against authority bled over into the government of our churches. For the most part we were

independent churches with little accountability.

Also, there were not many “fathers”—and when there are no fathers, sons and daughters will do pretty much whatever they want to do. The few fathers we did have we put on such pedestals that they couldn’t be fathers.

Charisma: How has your experience given you compassion toward others?

Lea: I have a deeper empathy. In every home, in every person’s life, sooner or later there’s going to be trouble on this planet. “Stuff” happens. But Jesus said: “Cheer up! I’ve overcome! Stick close to Me, and I’ll show you the way through.” He’s the only one who can touch that place deep inside that hurts so badly. I want everyone to know how tender and kind and personal Jesus is.

Charisma: How have you changed?

Lea: Hopefully I understand more fully that in my flesh dwells no good thing—and that apart from the grace of God working in my heart I am a wretched individual who is capable of all sorts of evil if put in the wrong circumstances. I need mercy, and so does the next guy. God alone is righteous in judgment.

Charisma: Do you believe that if Larry had been prescribed the appropriate medication earlier it would have saved your marriage?

Lea: Yes.

Charisma: Does the church, as a whole, understand depression and mental illness?

Lea: No, for the most part there has been much ignorance concerning it. We’ve often counted it as sin or demon possession, and it doesn’t have to be either one. Unless it touches a believer or someone close to them, most Christians don’t want to deal with it.

Charisma: How should Christians treat mental illness?

Lea: I think it should be treated compassionately. Nobody understands that level of pain unless they have experienced it. A person suffering in this way should be encouraged to seek compassionate, professional help.

Charisma: You seem to be excited about planting another church in Rockwall, Texas. Isn't it difficult to start over there, and what has God specifically called you to do?

Lea: For the last six years the Lord has been speaking to me about Rockwall. And for about the last year and a half He has been speaking to me more distinctly out of Isaiah to rebuild and restore.

I understand that what God did in the 1980s is over. I don't live in the past. This is a brand-new day, and the Holy Spirit is doing something right now. But this area is sacred to God.

In 1950, the year I was born, Kenneth Hagin prophesied over this region. There are so many churches out here now, and many of them came out of Church on the Rock. There is such [an] aroma of worship arising to [God] from this place.

For the past year God has been speaking to me about gathering those who have been called to pray, and I will begin doing that here in Rockwall. Instead of praying our own agenda we will wait to hear our assignments from God.

Charisma: What emotions do you feel when you drive past the former Church on the Rock building [now home to Lake Pointe Baptist]?

Lea: Several years ago we went back through the building. I absolutely cried my eyes out. The sense of loss was overwhelming. At the same time I had a sense of awe of what happened within the walls of that building. Now, there is no pain, only gratitude.

And speaking of gratitude, most days that's what I feel toward Larry. Outside of my parents, he has had the most impact on my life for God. He introduced me to the Holy Spirit.

Larry never quits. Even in the midst of the most terrifying nervous breakdown he didn't quit praying. He's a courageous man, and I pray and believe that he'll have yet another opportunity to positively impact the kingdom of God.

Charisma: Does your son, John, ever feel pressured to be like his father?

Lea: Anybody who serves under John's leadership understands that he is not called because of his daddy. He isn't trying to resurrect something. He has a divine commission from God that he takes very seriously.

Charisma: Would you ever remarry?

Lea: I would enjoy loving somebody—I just give it to my children and congregation now. If I could serve the Lord with we could be better together than separate, then, yes, I would love to be married.

Carol Chapman Stertz is a Dallas-based writer. She served as assistant editor when Charisma reported on the PrimeTime Live exposé in February 1992.