

Contagious Prayer Movement: Fresh Fire in the Upperroom

Evening. Morning. Noon.

What started out as a prayer meeting on Passover of 2010 is now a church called UPPERRROOM where the beauty of Jesus is celebrated and worshipped above anything else—and His presence is transforming lives.

Overlooking the city above a veterinarian clinic in the epicenter of homosexuality in downtown Dallas, Texas, this “upper room” prayer meeting began rent-free with a group of hungry believers in Jesus. They could never have imagined that what they were pioneering in that small place would now appear around the world on phones and computer screens in nations like Kenya, Brazil and South Africa.

In UPPERRROOM church, worship goes for an hour or sometimes an hour and a half before anyone ever gets up to teach the Word, a strange phenomenon in the modern church within a culturally diverse city. People are fascinated to see Millennials and Gen Z young people standing in lines starting at 8:00 on a Sunday morning to make sure they get a seat in the auditorium for a service two hours later.

This urban church in the Arts District only fits 850 people in the main auditorium and 200 in the overflow room. The building reaches capacity every Sunday during two services, and handling the logistics of parking and volunteers to make it all work has become a constant challenge.

Pastor Michael Miller, affectionately called “Miller,” is the visionary of the movement, surrounded by a team of elders and young staffers to help run the day-to-day church operations. This now 45-year-old leader—who gets ribbed for his resemblance to Ben Affleck—and his wife, Lorisa, have seen

this church flourish. As a young family with small children, they have often found their ministry overwhelming as well.

Presence and Power

Though Miller quickly admits that UPPERRROOM doesn't get everything right, he knows they do one thing well: They prioritize Jesus.

For years, God kept UPPERRROOM hidden away in worship and intercession. In fact, He specifically spoke to Miller not to "mark" the move of God with a website or any other form of marketing. He even had to negotiate with God to put up a Google Map online to make sure people found the place and came at the right times.

With friends from the Millers' former Church of Christ background and new people they met around the city, the young congregation went after God with thanksgiving, worship and intercession. Following the pattern from Psalm 55:17—"Evening and morning and at noon"—the church began with two-hour worship and prayer sets three days a week, which Miller says in those early days was "accessible and doable."

They used an iPod before they had live musicians, and Miller describes their early meetings as "raw and messy," with no programs, events or dynamic personalities to help pull people into the prayer meetings. People came for one reason alone: Jesus' presence.

"In those early years, we had two or three deaf ears open," he says. "We saw some notable miracles, and then community formed. It took over eight months for me to even begin to call it a church. It was just a Sunday-evening prayer meeting that expanded to more prayer meetings."

And the presence of God in worship began changing lives. Though they started in an area some call the "gayborhood," God made it clear to Miller that they were not there to minister

to people per se, but to Jesus alone. The outflow of ministry to people came from the place of constant communion with God.

“We have had homosexuals come here who have not set foot in a church in decades,” Miller says. “I can think of one man who had been abused by a pastor, and it was part of his journey in becoming a homosexual. ... he had a sovereign encounter with Jesus in his bedroom. When someone told him about UPPERRROOM, he started coming to our services. Sitting in the corner, He described his experience as saying that when we started singing, he felt like someone was hugging him.”

That man is now very outspoken about the destructiveness of the gay lifestyle and champions the Spirit’s life-changing power. Through the years, the church has witnessed many people come out of homosexuality, addictions and destructive lifestyles.

Media and Multiplication

With UPPERRROOM hidden away as a small gathering for more than six years, Miller didn’t ever consider broadcasting the church culture to the world. The Lord spoke time and again for them to remain anonymous.

But that changed in 2016 when Brian Guerrin of Bridal Glory International received a national word in which he saw an HDMI cable in the mouth of the Lord. “God is about to use media in the days ahead,” was Guerrin’s prophetic word, which Miller took as a word for UPPERRROOM.

Confirmation came when God gave Miller a vision of a dying Millennial in a hospital room. He saw the Lord wheel in an IV drip labeled “UPPERRROOM” and hook it up to the young person. Miller says the Lord spoke clearly—“Start dripping moments of UPPERRROOM culture into culture.”

With an idea from the baristas at the church coffee shop, the UPPERRROOM YouTube channel was born. The church started

recording everything in its worship sets, then clipping and uploading the most anointed moments online.

The first viral moment on the new YouTube channel happened with a song called “Tremble” by Mosaic MSC, sung at a Sunday service by Abbie Gamboa. Currently, the worship video has over 5 million views.

The next viral moment happened with a song that wasn’t even a song.

Miller had just preached, and he asked the worship team to respond and sing something based on his message. The bridge and chorus “Surrounded” became a spontaneous moment in UPPERRROOM history that catapulted the church into national fame.

Michael W. Smith’s producer was looking for one more song to put on his newest worship album set for a 2018 release, and he came across “Surrounded.” God opened the door for Smith to include the UPPERRROOM song on his album; UPPERRROOM later added verses to “Surrounded” and recorded it as well.

The UPPERRROOM worship team is multicultural, with Hispanic, Black, Asian and white worshippers of every shape, every size, united around one goal: going after Jesus every day together. With the rise of their online presence, these undiscovered worshippers were soon being invited to lead worship at major conferences around the nation.

Worship leader Elyssa Smith was unknown to the world before that moment—in her own words, “rejected” at worship team auditions for years. Just like UPPERRROOM, she had been hidden away on her own journey with God—“finding a real relationship with Him outside of the bounds of music.”

The “Surrounded” moment catapulted Smith into the status of a national worship leader who now co-writes with some of America’s top Christian worship artists. Her newfound success

has shown her “how important it is to live in community and to find safe people to worship God with,” she says. “There is nothing I would rather do than worship, but I want to do it with other people. Jesus should be the center of everything we do—all parts of our lives. Not just in a room, but when we go home. We shouldn’t compartmentalize where He is.”

Prayer, not Personality

Today, if you wander into the Dallas church at 6 a.m, you most likely will see a worship and prayer team with 30 or more people scattered around the room—some with Bibles open, some with hands lifted and some on their knees.

With around 150 people at its lunchtime prayer set at noon and others sitting in the presence of God after work at 6 p.m., the church operates a vibrant, continual prayer community. UPPERRROOM Dallas has now filled in the hours between those sets with additional devotional worship sets and a special two-hour prayer set on Saturday mornings.

“Jesus said, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer,’” Miller says. “That is *the* defining activity of His house. I am going to be very blunt here, but Jesus is homeless right now. ... The pursuit of being relevant is dangerous, and I think the Holy Ghost is power-washing the bride of Christ and stripping us of all the caked-on makeup and the things we put on ourselves. This worshipping bride is actually really attractive to the world. The world is looking for that love expression.”

After two decades of leadership in prayer ministries, Corey Russell moved from the International House of Prayer in Kansas City in 2018 to UPPERRROOM and became a part of the pastoral staff. He has a passion to see local churches become married to prayer, and he saw that passion lived out in UPPERRROOM’s simple devotion to Jesus—not “centered around the anointed worship leaders or how great the sound is” but centered on the Son of God.

A typical Sunday service at UPPERRROOM Dallas includes extended worship over an hour or more, followed by a message of discipleship led by a rotation of leaders in the church like Miller; his wife and co-pastor, Lorisa; Russell or Peter Louis, a young evangelist and teacher.

"We knew we wanted to build around the presence of God, not a personality," Miller says of the rotation, in which he only speaks 50% of the time. "The environment awakens something in people because that is what they were created for."

Modern church growth methods say just the opposite—emphasizing a 20-minute worship experience and then a 20-minute message because people have short attention spans. So how are all these young people singing for hours and then coming back week after week for more?

Extravagance and Expansion

Russell has the answer: "Extravagance. Our overwhelming focus on Him, His presence and what He can do versus our own marketing strategies or our great ability to make church more exciting. ... This generation is so sick of the polished [church] machine. The rawness of what they see here in us—just going after Jesus—draws people."

Miller sees the meticulous song choice and emphasis on Jesus above all else as crucial elements. "It was really important for me that we put the right type of songs into the mouths of God's people," he says. "The Holy Spirit's favorite subject is Jesus, so we sing about Jesus. We can get really bored singing about ourselves, but if we sing about Jesus, we can go for hours ... There are activities that we do—worship, thanksgiving and praise—that actually usher in His presence."

But the impact of what happens in the room doesn't stay there. People come in to meet with Jesus and then go out into the mission field of their city.

For Temi, a Nigerian national in her 30s, UPPERRROOM is where her closest friends are. Her friends at work see her UPPERRROOM friends constantly coming into her workplace, and they want to know how she knows so many people.

“UPPERRROOM is where there are no classes, no racial barriers and where the amount in our bank accounts doesn’t matter,” she says. “We gather around Jesus and Him alone.”

Ethan, at 17 and a junior in high school, was done with church and in his words, “religious yuckiness.” Weary of people who “proclaimed Jesus with their lips but denied Him with their lifestyle,” he even went as far as to tell his mother that he was “leaving the faith completely.”

Then he stumbled across an UPPERRROOM worship experience on YouTube. Captivated, he couldn’t stop crying. “I have to book a flight and go to UPPERRROOM,” he told his mom, not realizing the church was in the metroplex where they lived.

Ethan’s life dramatically changed when he encountered the Lord in the church auditorium. Today, he’s bold about inviting his peers to church. “God’s there. Come!” he tells them.

“We do one thing well at UPPERRROOM,” he says. “We love Him well.”

Today UPPERRROOM as a worship music label, partnering with Capitol Music Group for distribution, streams across all platforms in 146 countries around the world. Its YouTube channel has over 450,000 subscribers, and it has a huge social media reach. UPPERRROOM’s impact expanded even more in 2021 as its worship leaders collaborated on two albums with Maverick City Music called “Move Your Heart” and “You Hold It All Together.”

To the UPPERRROOM family, the music is just a taste of a vibrant church community that, above all, loves on the Lord and then shows the world how He designed us to live: in

intimate relationship with Jesus.

UPPERRROOM has planted churches in Frisco—a neighboring North Dallas suburb—Denver and even India, and has plans to create churches in some of the most challenging cities in the nation. The church also hopes to expand worship in the nation of Israel and around the U.S. (Check out their Maranatha events for 2022 at).

In the natural, it doesn't make sense to invest so much money into expanding worship in other areas when the Dallas church has outgrown its space, but UPPERRROOM continues to move out by faith. Leaders are planning a new worship campus in downtown Dallas with renowned architect Bryan Trubey, known for building some of the best sports and entertainment venues in the nation.

This presence-focused church is not perfectly put together. Without a full complement of programs, it remains messy, but the leadership knows it is producing fruit that remains.

Churches in the UPPERRROOM network want to focus on making God's heart happy above everything else until He returns. They realize God's ability to make them into the image of Christ must align with their availability to Him.

"It is possible for everyone to experience Jesus just like we do—but it will cost a lot," Smith says. "We have to lay down what people think and lay down our expectations on how people respond. ... If we let God have His way, people will go away and say, 'I met with the Lord.'"

That defines UPPERRROOM: His presence transforming lives.

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