

Despite Rumors, Calvary Assembly Megachurch Is Not for Sale

Back in the 1970s, Calvary Assembly was one of the first charismatic “megachurches” in America. It spun off many ministries, including *Charisma* magazine. In the late 1980s, it built a 5,500-seat auditorium, but today the congregation has dwindled to 650 members.

When rumors began reaching us last week that Calvary had sold its impressive campus to a large hospital nearby, I contacted the church to see if the rumors were true. The answer is Calvary Assembly has not been sold, but also that it is not for sale!

In fact, interim pastor Dr. Bob Rhoden told me he believes Calvary “will be an impact church in the future.”

In a short phone interview, he also said, “The future won’t look like the past, but it will build on the past, on its great history.”

Sometimes when there is a rumor and it’s not true, journalists just leave it alone—there is no story. But this rumor is so strong, it seemed that a story was necessary to report that the rumors are not true. Because of my long history with the church, we decided my weekly e-newsletter was the place to report this. It was also my chance to give an update on what’s happening with Calvary Assembly.

The rumors may have come from the fact that Florida Hospital often rents the huge facility, as explained in Calvary’s statement below, and rents the parking lot during the week to shuttle students and some staff to the hospital a short five minutes away.

My wife and I started attending Calvary 40 years ago when I had just finished college. At the time, Calvary had a membership of 600—about what it is today. A few years later, after my wife and I served in the children's ministry and youth ministry and sang in the choir, I made a proposal, and the church allowed me to start a little magazine called *Charisma*.

There's been a misconception over the years that *Charisma* started as a church newsletter. It was never a newsletter. As amateurish as those early issues were, it was always an 8 1/2 x 11-inch magazine as it is today. The first issue sported only 32 pages and cost 50 cents, and we gave away most of the 10,000 copies we printed. But it was a magazine that slowly evolved into a national publication and later gave birth to what we now call Charisma Media.

Charisma spun off from Calvary in 1981 as a separate organization, shortly before the late Roy Harthern, then the pastor, stepped down due to moral indiscretions. The history below recounts some of the ups and downs. The church experienced a sort of renaissance under the ministry of both Dr. Mark Rutland and Clark Whitten. But over the years many people left—including me and my wife—and Calvary has struggled to stop that trend.

I didn't know Dr. Rhoden until he came to Calvary as the interim pastor. At an age when most men retire, his task is to hold things together until a new leader can be found. He has a great reputation as a district superintendent and executive presbyter in the Assemblies of God. His book *Four Faces of a Leader: What It Takes to Move Your Church Forward* reflects his ample experience teaching leadership.

In our interview, he told me he is building hope by quoting Acts 13:44 to the congregation: "On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God."

That's an amazing Scripture, considering a church that has only 650 or so in an auditorium that seats nearly 10 times as many. But as Dr. Rhoden told me, "The time for God to do a miracle is when you need a miracle."

That miracle must come in the form of a visionary leader. Calvary Assembly isn't the first church or ministry to see things turn around. And many businesses and even governments have seen remarkable turnarounds with the right leadership. Orlando, Fla., needs Calvary Assembly to be a great church again. Let's pray the right leader is found.

Below is the statement and the history Calvary administrator Debbie Carey provided me. It provides more detail and perspective in her own words.

Florida Hospital

Calvary Assembly has enjoyed an amicable and mutually beneficial relationship with Florida Hospital for many years. The hospital's main Orlando campus is a mere five-minute drive from the church.

For more than a decade, the Worship Center has been the location of the hospital's annual Thanksgiving concert and, more recently, the biannual graduation and annual convocation ceremonies of the Adventist University of Health Sciences.

For a number of years, the hospital has leased one of the church's north parking lots for the university's students, who are transported to the school via shuttle. Periodically, a portion of the south parking lot has been rented for contractor parking and, most recently, for employee parking. The hospital's parking facilities have not kept pace with its rapid expansion.

Calvary History

Spring 1953—Pastor: John Hall, founding pastor. Small church building constructed on two residential lots; originally named Orlando Gospel Tabernacle; 35 people in attendance at the

first service

1954—Became part of the growing fellowship of the Assemblies of God.

1961—Pastor: Dr. Dale Zink. The church was renamed Calvary Assembly of God. Additional land purchased and construction began in 1964 on a 500-seat sanctuary.

1966—Pastor: Eddie Barg.

1970—Pastor: Roy Harthern; a congregation of just under 300 people.

1975—1,200 seat auditorium dedicated.

The church experienced phenomenal growth throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s, reaching a pinnacle of more than 5,000 in attendance at multiple services.

Ministries birthed at Calvary Assembly in the 1970s and 1980s:

- Rock House
- *Charisma* magazine
- Jesus Festivals (1976-1980)
- Crown Ministries
- Iglesia El Calvario
- WTGL TV Channel 45

Fall 1981—Pastor: Alex Clattenburg.

November 1984—Broke ground for the existing 5,000 seat sanctuary; dedicated in Spring 1987.

May 1990—Pastor: Dr. Mark Rutland; attendance of 1,300-1,400 and a mortgage of \$15-plus million. Retired close to \$4 million during his tenure, and the congregation grew to approximately 3,400 by 1995.

April 1995—Pastor: Clark Whitten; debt of \$11.5 million; burned the mortgage in September 2000.

January 2006—Pastor: Dr. George Cope.

May 2013—Interim pastor: Dr. Bob Rhoden.

Current average Sunday morning attendance: 650

Even in the days when the church had overwhelming debt and now in its current challenging season, Calvary's commitment to the cause of missions has never wavered. Eleven percent of the total tithes and offerings are being used to support 120 missionaries and ministries each month.