

How 18 Years at 'Charisma' Shaped My Life

When I joined the *Charisma* team in 1992, cell phones looked like bricks and the Internet didn't exist. No texting, no Google and no email. If I needed to research a topic for a story, I had to call a library on a landline phone, or—can you imagine?—actually go to the library and look up stuff.

The digital revolution hadn't started yet, so I was oblivious to what I was missing. All I knew was that I was happy to serve on the staff of the largest charismatic Christian magazine in the world. I stayed there for 18 years until I stepped into full-time ministry in 2010. Since *Charisma* is celebrating its 40th anniversary this month, I thought I would chime in with my own cherished memories.

1. Most spiritual moment. It's one thing for a smart-aleck journalist to report on a spiritual revival; it's another thing for that journalist to be spiritually wrecked by the experience. I went to Pensacola, Florida, in 1995 to write about the Brownsville Revival. I ended up on the floor of that church at least three times. I was overcome by the Holy Spirit's presence in those historic meetings, which were led by evangelist Steve Hill. (He became a friend until he died last year.) On that carpet inside Brownsville Assembly of God, the Lord dealt with a deep cynicism I was holding in my heart. Something holy was imparted to me in those meetings that prepared me for ministry.

2. Favorite interview. In August 2000 I received an urgent call informing me that *Charisma* could have an interview with Texas governor George W. Bush. I flew to Austin, boarded Bush's campaign plane and flew to Maine. About mid-flight, I was invited to the front of the plane to interview our future president for 30 minutes. I wasn't nervous because Bush was

his down-to-earth, folksy self—and our conversation about his faith made me feel I was with a brother in Christ. Before the interview ended I gave him a Scripture from Psalms and he wrote it down. I hope it gave him some comfort after the media and a majority of Americans turned against him years later.

3. Most sobering interview. When I traveled to North Carolina in 1996 to do a cover story on fallen TV evangelist Jim Bakker, I didn't go to rub his nose in the mess he'd made of his PTL empire. I could tell the guy was repentant the moment we met. He didn't sound like the cocky talk show host who bilked donors so he could buy gold-plated faucets for his mansion. The Jim Bakker I met was grieved over the mistakes he'd made. We ate dinner at his favorite low-priced Chinese restaurant next door to a K-mart. He told me sincerely: "I was wrong in so many ways, that it took five years of prison for God to deal with me."

4. Most meaningful part of my job: What blessed me the most about my 18 years at *Charisma* was the interaction I had with African-American, Hispanic and immigrant leaders in the body of Christ. In spite of the racism that still exists in our country, I learned that the Holy Spirit wants to build bridges, not walls, in the church. In 1994 I witnessed black and white Pentecostal leaders washing each other's feet in what came to be known as the Memphis Miracle. And during my subsequent years as editor I ate meals with black leaders, including G.E. Patterson, Charles Blake and C.D. Owens. They shaped my spiritual DNA. Building interracial ministry is a core value for me today.

5. Most life-shaping experience. At *Charisma* I was exposed to powerful female preachers, including Fuchsia Picket, Alice Smith, E.C. Reems, June Evans, Barbara Amos, Beth Moore, Sharon Daugherty and Cindy Jacobs. Yet we often received angry letters from readers who objected to our articles about women in the pulpit. Those letters sent me on a journey to discover what God thinks about the spiritual callings of women—and the

result was my first book, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women*. Today I have dedicated my life to helping release women into ministry.

6. Favorite article of my career. In 1997 I wrote an investigative feature about so-called Oneness Pentecostals—the people who insist on baptizing in Jesus’ name only. I wrote it partly out of fascination, but mostly because I had a genuine burden to see the Holy Spirit heal what has been a century-old rift in the church. The initial reaction to “The Other Pentecostals” was overwhelming—we received more letters about that article than any other during my tenure at the magazine. I still get comments about it 18 years later from ministers who say it affected them.

7. Most awkward interview. I will never forget sitting down on the Trinity Broadcasting Network set in California in 1998 to talk with Jan Crouch, wife of the late TBN founder Paul Crouch. There she was, with her trademark pink wig and false eyelashes, talking to me about how she was kicked out of Bible college in the 1950s because she didn’t obey all the rules of Pentecostal decorum. She called the professors who disciplined her “Sanhedrin”—and then reminded me that she didn’t like *Charisma* because we wrote about church scandals. She was as eccentric in real life as on camera, but I appreciated her honesty—especially when she told me: “God didn’t call Paul and I because we are good or because of our skills. He chose two of the most foolish, untalented people.”

8. All-time favorite issue. In 1998 I sent four reporters to the streets for a special evangelism issue. One interviewed hard-core bikers in Daytona Beach. One spent a few days on the streets with punk rockers in Chicago. Another spoke with gang-bangers in a risky neighborhood in Atlanta. And I went to San Francisco’s Polk Street district to talk to men living in the city’s gay underworld. I never felt more fulfilled when an issue of *Charisma* came off the press. We broke journalistic ground with that issue and called our readers to care about

lost people instead of judging them.

9. Least favorite part of the job: No job is perfect, and what I hated most about being the editor of *Charisma* was dealing with some of our “problem” advertisements. Editors usually have a love/hate relationship with ads: We need the money ads generate, but some ads are just plain ugly, and others are embarrassing. I normally didn’t see ads until the day before the magazine shipped out, and there was often a “miracle diet” ad promising a cure, or a conference guaranteeing personal prophecies, or a charlatan charging \$1,000 to be his spiritual son. I tried my best to screen those ads—and the current staff of *Charisma* continues to be watchful. Please forgive us if we let one slip though. This job is not easy.

10. Saddest part of the job: It felt wonderful to write articles about spiritual revivals and missionary breakthroughs, but there’s an ugly side to being a Christian journalist. I had to write about the scandals. And there were plenty on my watch, starting with the sordid reports of sexual abuse at Earl Paulk’s Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Atlanta in 1993. People often asked, “Why do you have to cover the scandals?” My response was always the same: We are providing accountability to a movement that has very few checks and balances. It isn’t fun to write about respected Christian leaders who fall into sin, go to jail, extort money or start teaching heresy. But when I saw the failures I didn’t become disillusioned. Through all the ups and downs of the charismatic movement, through all the glorious victories and embarrassing scandals, I have learned that Jesus is faithful and that the Holy Spirit is still working in the church in spite of our weakness.

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