

Revival Sparks in Tampa Bay as Spirit-Filled Church Advances Through Adversity

The rise of Countryside Christian Church, Clearwater, Florida, as a Spirit-led base for healing, wholeness and resources to the local community provides a blueprint for how the Holy Spirit moves and hope for the post-COVID-19 pandemic era.

Just when the situation looks impossible, hopeless or ambiguous, the Lord advances the church through the adversity, which is actually opportunity in disguise. Opposition hits before every major move of God, and then the supernatural happens naturally. This was the pattern that turned a home church plant with seven people in a living room in 1981 into a family-friendly megachurch in 2021 on the edge of a spiritual revival breaking loose in the Tampa Bay area.

“God’s hand has been on Countryside since the beginning, and the success that has happened was in spite of me. God’s will was going to be done, no matter what,” says Glenn Davis, lead pastor of Countryside Christian Church, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

“There has always been a special call on Countryside Christian Church to reach people, reach the lost, to be a fountainhead church that does a lot of healing and touches the community, such as through our Helping Hands ministry, which feeds 350 to 400 families every week. We’re a New Testament church doing the work of the gospel, not just preaching the gospel. Given everything that has happened, I have had to depend completely on God,” he adds.

Opposition emerged at every major turning point in the church’s history across four decades. It is miraculous that Countryside even exists—with its 2,500-seat sanctuary, full-

time school, multiple thriving ministries, expansion into South Tampa and plans to be a satellite campus of Southeastern University.

The church was born out of the Jesus Movement, founded in a Clearwater living room in the early '80s by John Lloyd, also considered one of the founders of contemporary Christian music. The megachurch concept had not yet emerged, but Lloyd had a big, bold vision that would be tested in the fire of adversity.

The church grew to 60 people in the home church setting after only three months. "Although it was a natural move for any church, there was opposition to moving the church out of the house because people did not want to lose the direct contact with the pastor," Davis says.

Countryside rented a restaurant ballroom with echo-prone tile floors. Immediately, opposition came in the form of complaints from customers on the other side of the restaurant, but the church grew to 200 people within six months. Then a local doctor donated the 12th floor of a Clearwater office building to the church, but a significant number of its members, comfortable in the restaurant, opposed the move.

Between 1982 and 1986, the church grew from 200 to 800 people, all experiencing the era's contemporary Christian music and the founding pastor's fiery preaching. "Pastor Lloyd was a modern-day zealot for the Lord," says Davis. "We became a praying church with 300 to 500 people coming to prayer meetings. It was an explosion in the '80s in Florida."

Despite another season of opposition to test the resolve of the leadership team, the church opened its first facility (its current youth center) in 1986 and expanded to 3,500 people by 1995.

"It was definitely a move of God," says Davis, who became a full-time youth pastor at Countryside during this time. "It

was not a church growth plan. It was a modern-day revival that was happening in the Tampa Bay area and led by Pastor Lloyd.”

Signs of this same kind of revival and spiritual awakening are revealing themselves again in the Tampa Bay area today, driving area pastors such as Davis to pray about God’s next move.

Is the opposition created by the COVID-19 pandemic a trigger for the next phase of His plan to replace lifeless, Spiritless “religion” with His glorious presence, power and love?

Countryside Christian Church has seen a 25% increase in new attendees between June 2020 and May 2021—despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, the church is running at 75% of its pre-COVID numbers. On Easter Sunday this year, more than 3,500 people attended services there.

Is it possible for more people to flock to churches in the Greater Tampa Bay Area than flock to the local beaches?

“Countryside is an example of how God will use ordinary men to do extraordinary things and change a community for Christ,” Davis says. “God can use underdogs to do something great. A lot of people feel like underdogs. They feel they were dealt bad things in life. But God can turn all that mess around, and it can be the greatest they could ever imagine if they just surrender to Him.”

Outside the “glory days” from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, Countryside Church went through many years of intense adversity. When the church launched its new building project to construct a 2,500-seat sanctuary in 2005, a sinkhole was discovered under the foundation. The project sat idle for one year, with \$2 million worth of concrete pilings on the property. When the project was restarted, workers discovered defective steel, shutting down the project for another year.

As the project restarted yet again, on came the global

financial crisis of 2007-2009. As tithes and offers decreased significantly, the cost of the building soared from \$12 million to \$24 million. Several contractors went out of business. Uncertainty reigned.

When the new building opened in June 2009, the pastoral team anticipated an upsurge in attendance. After all, the Holy Spirit had led them to build this new building. But a significant number of people left the church, which now faced foreclosure. Would Countryside survive?

When Lloyd retired and Davis was named the new senior pastor, the season of adversity and opposition shifted once again, and the church grew from 1,200 to over 3,000 people attending each week. "It was a stretch for me, but we had so much growth," Davis says. "We said to ourselves, 'OK, this must be God. Let's keep going.'"

The lessons the church learned through these continuous cycles of opposition and blessing help carry it forward today, offering hope and an example to smaller churches. Opposition is part of the equation. Yet it is also the jumping-off point to advance through the adversity to reach a place it might not otherwise go.

"In our greatest times of difficulty, our church rallies," says Davis. "Our church is very resilient. In the middle of when you feel the most down, living in what seems like the most difficult moment, God moves in that."

If there is opposition to the gospel message and healing power of Jesus Christ spreading in Clearwater and South Tampa, watch what God does next.

"The Tampa Bay area is prime for revival, and what I mean by that is seeking the face of God," Davis says. "As more people get tired of the ways of the world, more people are coming to know the Lord and getting plugged into church. Sitting around singing 'Kumbaya' is not going to help anyone. More people are

plugging into God Himself like never before. Having just gone through the crisis of COVID and all the opposition, adversity and shutdowns, this is our greatest moment to see God move.”
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