

Sound the Alarm: A New Spiritual Revolution is Here

In the 18th century, traveling preachers—often called “circuit riders” or “saddleback preachers”—rode on horseback across the U.S. frontier, bringing the gospel to rural groups and communities. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and Francis Asbury were two of the most famous circuit riders; Asbury is estimated to have traveled more than a quarter million miles and preached 16,000 sermons.

Now a new generation of circuit riders are taking the gospel to college campuses so thousands of young people can encounter the life-changing power of the gospel. The model is simple. Though it functions as a branch of Youth With a Mission (YWAM), the Circuit Riders organization is not promoting or creating any particular ministries on the campuses it visits. Rather, a team of young adult evangelists comes for a few days, preaches the gospel, trains and equips believers on that campus to continue the work themselves and then departs for the next campus.

As Nick Brennt puts it, “We’re just huge believers that the best evangelists on the campus are the students themselves.”

Though Circuit Riders eschews specific titles so as to emphasize team equality and cooperation, Amy Ward and father-and-son duo Brian and Nick Brennt serve as leaders within the organization. In interviews, Brian says his own role is that of a “spiritual father” for the ministry, while people like Nick and Ward act as “national catalysts” overseeing the larger movement. The movement’s holistic structure and focus on evangelism and discipleship in tandem are heavily influenced by its parent organization, YWAM and the historic circuit riders, from which the group derives its name.

“John Wesley had a real method,” Brian says. “Every circuit rider could preach the gospel. Every circuit rider could lead a prayer meeting. Every circuit rider could awaken the saints with a message of Jesus and surrender. [Every] new circuit rider would have the same core messages and ability to do that. The attitude and grit of the original circuit riders is something that really translated into the modern era of circuit riders—that determination to leave no campus out. It doesn’t matter if it’s a small campus in the middle of nowhere. If there’s an invitation, we’re going. We definitely have the attitude: ‘God’s going to do something there. We must go.’”

More than two centuries after the original circuit riders traveled the country, Nick says their mission is as relevant and needed as ever.

“We always say, ‘Save the lost, revive the saved and train them all,’” Nick says. “It’s this cry that we want to see the lost saved. We want to see every believer in a vibrant, on-fire relationship with Jesus. And we want to see all of them activated.”

It’s a message and a model that are resonating with young adults around the world. In the last year alone, Circuit Riders teams have ministered at roughly 300 universities in the U.S. and Europe. And the movement keeps growing as more and more youth catch the vision.

“Before, it seemed like kids were trained to just join current organizations,” Brian says. “Now there’s an entrepreneurial spirit in kids. When you empower them and train them in the gospel, they take that fire, gather their friends and begin worship nights. They begin to go out and evangelize. They just begin to create. ... There’s all these [young adults] on these campuses that get lit on fire and start movements among their friends.”

Angelic Encounters

Circuit Riders began after Ward had a prophetic encounter on July 7, 2010, while praying in her bedroom in Kona, Hawaii.

"It was in the evening time, and I just felt like the Lord wanted to speak to me," Ward says. "The entire atmosphere of my room changed, and I looked up and there was actually an angel standing in my bedroom."

The angel appeared to be wearing colonial clothing and a messenger bag like Paul Revere. (Ward says the angel was not Paul Revere, but that name and appearance were impressed on her mind during the encounter.) Though Ward says her background is in the prophetic, she says she had never experienced a visitation like this before.

"The angel said, 'I represent a people who will ride into the night to declare and prepare the way of a revolution that will lead to reformation,'" Ward says. "He said that in his bag were documents and messages of that nature, and some of them were about the release of the glory of God. He said there were those who would go and sound an alarm of awakening. Then the next thing he said was, 'The Lord is going to release His circuit riders again,' and when he said that, suddenly I'm not in the room anymore. If you asked what I was seeing, I guess it was an open vision. I saw this statue of a man on a horse ... and lines of fire crisscrossing America and going into the nations. This phrase 'fiery-eyed revivalist' appears. Then suddenly I'm back, and the angel is still standing there in my room. He said, 'These revivalists will declare the gospel. ... You'll understand more of this later.' And he disappeared."

Stunned and shaking after this encounter, Ward did some research and concluded the significance of the Paul Revere clothing was that Revere was a messenger of the American Revolution, and this angel acted as a symbolic messenger of a spiritual revolution.

A few months later, Ward had another angelic encounter while driving from Bakersfield to Los Angeles, California, to meet with the YWAM team. (She says the encounter lasted roughly 45 minutes, during which time she does not remember driving.)

“Suddenly the angel was in the car ... and spoke again,” Ward says. “He said the Lord was going to release His circuit riders, and that they [would come] out of Los Angeles, California, and sweep across America. He spoke of a few other things in that moment and then disappeared.”

Ward wondered whether she had heard God correctly, but says she feels the word was confirmed by what happened next. After arriving in downtown Los Angeles, she met with her team and saw a little boy nearby wearing a shirt that featured artwork of a horse and a rider and the words “Paul Revere.” Then she received a text message from a team member in Boston: “Look where we’re standing right now.” Attached was a picture of her team in front of the Paul Revere statue.

“So the Lord [demonstrated], ‘This is really me,’” Ward says. “Those were the encounters that really catalyzed Circuit Riders. We never told anybody about those encounters in those first couple years, because we didn’t want people to come because of an encounter or an angel or anything like that.”

But Circuit Riders began in summer 2011 with a training school. Nick and Brian remember the event was barely advertised at all—and what little marketing they did “wasn’t even good”—but somehow 300 people found out about it and signed up. Of those 300 students, 150 had dreams of a Jesus movement coming out of California. The ministry moved to Huntington Beach, California—the current home base for Circuit Riders—and the leaders say they felt the Lord drawing them to college campuses.

At the first campus they visited—the University of Southern California (USC)—a series of miracles led to 150 college

students accepting salvation in Christ, according to Nick. After that, he says, their testimonies spread to other college campuses in California, and Circuit Riders soon got requests to visit other schools.

“They began calling us, saying, ‘Hey, we want you to come into our campus. We want to see an evangelistic breakthrough here,’” Nick says. “But in our minds, we didn’t even know how we just had this breakthrough [at USC]. There were so many miracles that led to that moment. What do we do? So we just said, ‘Hey, here’s the deal. We don’t know what it’s going to look like. But we’ll come with our stories of faith. We’ll come and just press in with you.’ And we would just go and pray with the students, get a word of the Lord and then go for it.”

Nick remembers the next school where they saw breakthrough was the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA). A star running back for the UCLA Bruins caught the vision and united the Christian groups on campus for an evangelistic gathering. Word of mouth continued. That year, Circuit Riders visited 10 campuses. The next year, they ministered at 22 campuses. The movement had begun.

Barnabas Ministry

Currently, Circuit Riders functions as a YWAM missionary community based out of Huntington Beach. About 200 missionaries serve full time through Circuit Riders now, though all involved raise their own salaries. When the ministry gets an invitation to a college campus, usually a team of about 25 people—comprised of preachers, worship team members and other staff—will depart for the campus and stay for two days before heading to the next stop.

“The first day is this unified gathering of believers—unbelievers come too—and we preach the gospel message,” Nick says. “The harvest is ripe. It’s really a

message of activation and equipping. But we always move into ministry in the gospel, and the Lord moves on that night. Then the second day is always about putting it into practice. So it's evangelism on the campus. It's taking students out. We do one-on-one meetings with students and key leaders. We gather men and women and specifically speak to them about activating to reach their campuses. And then we end it with a time of testimonies and commissioning."

The teams are predominantly young adults close to college age. Brian says during the early days of Circuit Riders, that developed out of necessity rather than design. Though he served as the team's spiritual father and older mentor, he had to care for his wife, Christie, who was chronically ill with Lyme's disease. (She has since experienced a miraculous healing.) Because Brian was unable to leave her for weeks at a time, the young Circuit Riders team had to step up and take initiative to plan the tours, coordinate the bands and preach the messages. In hindsight, Brian says God turned this limitation into the ministry's primary strength.

"The young people did everything," Brian says. "And when other young people would see that, they would go, 'This is no joke. You need me,' and they would join the ranks. They would sit next to each other and go to work. There was no ranking. There was no [seniority], like 'I've been here four years, and you've only been here two years.' It was just young people working with young people. ... And kids on college campuses love it. I don't think they would have really even listened to guys my age. They would have appreciated it. But it's something else when a 22-year old is telling you, 'This is what happened to my life.' Youth leading youth is absolutely a Jesus movement."

Circuit Riders emphasizes collaboration over leadership or hierarchical structures—and that applies not only internally, but in its relationships with other ministries. Both Nick and Ward describe Circuit Riders as a "Barnabas ministry" that

aims to support and assist existing ministries rather than supplant them.

“The Circuit Riders are meant to be a Barnabas to other things,” Ward says. “So when they go onto college campuses, they’re not trying to start something with Circuit Riders. They’re coming alongside the existing Christian organizations to help bring unity and support. It isn’t about trying to start something new as much as it is about coming alongside to support. Unity is a really big part of what the Circuit Riders do and carry, and I actually think they’re successful in that. We’re seeing such a unification on college campuses between different denominations and groups.”

Spiritual Anointing

While working on campuses, Nick and Brian say they’ve observed some trends in how the Holy Spirit is moving among the next generation. For one, Nick says the ministry is seeing an “explosion” of young women on college campuses who are being activated as evangelists.

“Some of the greatest evangelists on college campuses across America right now are women,” Nick says. “They’re rising up, and it’s so amazing. Men are rising up too, but there is something noticeably special in what the Lord’s doing with women. Our whole team can see it—both guys and girls. I don’t know what it is, but it’s so fun to watch. Women have gotten activated and led so many people to Christ in their dorms, [to the point that leaders say,] ‘How many did you lead? That is crazy.’ That silence is getting ripped off their voice.”

Yasmin Pierce, a fellow member of the Circuit Riders team on campuses, says many times, it’s about telling women they have permission to evangelize.

“For young women on college campuses, it’s simply a question a lot of times of permission: ‘Do I have permission to step out? Do I have permission to use my voice?’” Pierce says. “So for

us, our job is really easy. It's really bringing together women, looking at examples in the Bible like Deborah, and saying, 'Hey, the Lord's given you permission. You don't have to wait for someone to give you direct steps on what to do. If your heart is broken for your campus, if your heart is broken for your city, look at these scriptural examples where God used women to see a breakthrough, where God used women to see a deliverance. And go for it and step out.' ... It's always astounding to me and our team how needed that message of empowerment is for women on campuses."

Brian says many students are awakening to their calling as missionaries. But the concept of "mission" is being interpreted differently.

"One of the exciting things is the broadening of the definition of mission," Brian says. "A college student, for example, can't leave their college and go to Afghanistan in a traditional sense. But we really emphasize that their campus is a mission, and they're a missionary. Every one of us is a missionary into the spheres. So what happens is, everyone then becomes part of a potential solution to an area of society, and all are activated. ... It's tearing the veil between the sacred and the secular, and now the marketplace is a mission field. This is exploding, and I think this is part of the fuel of the Jesus movement."

Yet there is still plenty of desire to reach the nations with the gospel.

"I've done altar calls where I'll say, 'Stand up if God's already called you to specifically be a foreign missionary long term in the nations,'" Nick says. "And it's crazy how many students will stand up and say, 'The only reason I'm here in college is I'm getting a degree so I can go be a missionary, because God encountered me when I was a young person, and I knew I was supposed to go.' When we come to these [schools], there's so much vision in each student, but

they're just waiting for someone to say, 'It's time. Don't wait any more. You have permission. The Holy Spirit is with you. God is going to help you do this. You don't need more finances. You don't need more connections. You don't need to be more polished. God is asking you to step out right now in your small beginnings. Step out with your entrepreneurial, pioneering faith, and God's going to meet you.'"

And as Revere did centuries ago, Ward believes the Circuit Riders are alerting many to a spiritual revolution taking place.

"I really do believe that the Holy Spirit is breaking off passivity," Ward says. "He's breaking off fear and intimidation. You really are seeing a generation wanting to take responsibility for [problems] they didn't even cause. I feel like the Holy Spirit is rising up in love but in justice and truth. There's a war. There's a battle over all these things. But I see ... another revival in this generation." {eo}

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