

Verified by God

Pastor Michael Todd leads one of the fastest-growing churches in the country, but the vast majority of his audience isn't coming to the church building. Todd, the lead pastor of Transformation Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, says in any given week, his church gets roughly 5,000 people in the building—and more than 35,000 online. When fewer than 1 in 8 of your churchgoers actually go to your church building, what does that mean for pastors?

Long before coronavirus ever forced churches to shift services online, Todd believes the digital age changed what it means to be a pastor.

"The first thing you have to know is the internet has changed everything," Todd says. "And [in some ways], the last thing it has touched is the church—because we want to keep our traditions. I really do believe the Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples, but I don't think we could have done that in health until now, with the internet. There's no way I could be a good father and a good husband and all this other stuff, and now also go into the world and make disciples. Even if you're [focusing] only on your house and your neighborhood, that's still a huge undertaking. But I believe God's given us the internet ... for great good."

But Todd says he has no illusions that his church's success can be attributed to savvy marketing, great technological design or his own inspired preaching. In fact, he says his entire testimony served as a test of obedience: Was he willing to obey God even when it didn't make sense or match his own life plans?

Todd chose to obey—and God blessed his ministry beyond his wildest expectations. With his first book, *Relationship Goals: How to Win at Dating, Marriage and Sex*, releasing today, Todd

spoke to *Charisma* about his incredible journey up to this point. (Don't miss the *Charisma* June/July 2020 print edition, which features a much longer interview with Todd, in which he explains his approach to reaching young adults for Jesus, what it means to be a pastor in the Internet age and how to cultivate and lead a racially and generationally diverse church. [Subscribe to the magazine here.](#))

Promotion and Favor

Todd never wanted to be a pastor. In fact, as a teenager, he wasn't even sure he wanted to be a Christian. Though he grew up in a Christian home, he says he never had an authentic relationship with God until his late teenage years. Before then, he says he was primarily raised and disciplined by BET and MET—and the church didn't have answers for the problems he and his peers were going through.

"I messed up so much because I didn't have an example," Todd says. "The only rule we were given was, 'Don't have sex before you get married.' Well, what happens when you've done that? What happens when the locker room introduced you to pornography? What happens when you saw a *Playboy* you weren't supposed to see while looking for some tissue paper at your uncle's house? The church has been so silent about that. In recent years, they've started talking about it, but even then, the church is so PG when our middle school locker rooms are R-rated and X-rated. ... So what ends up happening is we're trying to spend the rest of our lives undoing what was presented first."

That feeling of being failed by the church as a teenager is part of why Todd says he's so passionate about helping teenagers and young adults today. He says he wishes he'd had a cool, relatable, young mentor like himself when he was struggling with his faith.

Instead, Todd says what drew him back into relationship with

the Lord was his love of music. He had played drums since childhood, and the church worship team became his primary musical outlet. During high school, he began pursuing music full time and, after graduating, started his own production company and became a music producer. During that season, he flew around the country to events and studios to produce music for clients.

One of those gigs took him to Greenwood Christian Center (GCC) in his hometown of Tulsa in 2008. He knew the pastor there, who asked him to run sound for a conference. After he did a good job, the pastor asked him to keep running sound at the church. Later, the pastor noticed his musical talent and transitioned him to becoming the worship leader.

At this time, Todd was splitting his time between GCC and serving at his parents' small church plant in the same city, called Spirit and Truth Praise and Worship Center. (Todd jokes, "You could get saved just from the name of the church.") His involvement at his parents' church began after his mother called him on the phone and informed him, "God told me you're supposed to do something with the youth of this church."

Todd tried to politely refuse—even suggesting that maybe she had misheard God, who actually meant to use one of her four other sons. After all, Todd had never preached or taught from the Bible. But his mom would not be swayed. The next week, Todd became the youth pastor of his parents' church. There were only seven youth present: three of his brothers, three godbrothers and godsisters, and one other person. (The church itself had only 15 members.) Todd called the ministry "SO FLY," an acronym for "Sold Out Free Life Youth."

"I had never prepared a message, never [led a group], never done anything like that," Todd says. "But God told me four things before I walked in there. He said, 'Be real. Tell on yourself. Don't judge them. And love them first.' And that was

my instructional guide into ministry.”

Six months later, Todd says SO FLY had 150 young adults attending on a weekly basis. His parents’ church was still only 15 adults. SO FLY had no flashy sound system, game systems or electronics. The youth group was 150 young people “literally in a room in a circle,” Todd says.

Today, he recognizes it was a spiritual phenomenon, but at the time, he says he didn’t take it that seriously. He didn’t even study or prepare message notes; he just showed up every week planning to share what was going on in his life, talk about the Bible and try to relate to the kids. He says he focused on the four tenets God taught him before his first night of SO FLY—to be real, to tell on yourself, to not judge and to love first. That meant confessing his own sins to the group at times—including pornography addiction and emotional manipulation—and sharing how Jesus personally transformed him every day. He believes that raw, uncomfortable honesty is the real reason young people responded to him.

“I think people are drawn to authenticity,” Todd says. “We have a saying around here: ‘It’s not about perfection; it’s about progression.’ ... The Bible tells us we overcome ... by the blood of the Lamb—that’s what God did and what Jesus did on the cross—but then by the words of our testimony. And I think that’s what’s missing today.”

Todd continued to lead SO FLY for another year, until about 250 young people were coming every week in 2010. During that time, Todd started to compare the work he was doing at GCC with the work he was doing at his parents’ church. He believed Bishop Gary McIntosh, GCC’s founding pastor, needed more pastoral help, while he thought his evangelism-minded, charismatic parents could use some structure—and then he realized the two churches should team up and become one. Though there was initial resistance, over the course of three months, both sides became open to it, and eventually Todd’s

parents' church merged into GCC. And when it did, SO FLY grew even bigger.

"It got up to about 900 young people in summer 2011," Todd remembers. "We still had no real leadership team—it was just me, my new wife [Natalie] and my godsister. Then I preached a message on purity and cut the thing in half, to about 400 or 500 young people. For about three years, that's where I learned. I had no budget. We had to raise a leadership team of 12. We did internships. I had to teach the young people how to give because we had no budget, and the church had just gone through a hard financial season."

Todd served faithfully in the youth ministry, but his fruitfulness did not evade McIntosh's eye. McIntosh met with Todd in 2013 and told him he wanted Todd to help him bring the SO FLY culture to the Sunday morning crowd. At 25, Todd was named the executive pastor of the church, and McIntosh mentored Todd in leadership, bringing him to all the board and financial meetings, letting him program services and design sermon series.

Then McIntosh had a heart attack that sidelined him completely for eight months—and Todd was the only one at the church who knew how to do McIntosh's job.

"For eight months, I preached four different sermons to different groups of people every week," Todd says. "On Sunday morning, I was preaching to a mostly traditional Pentecostal church. On Sunday night, I was preaching to a bunch of youth who were just trying to explore God and see if they wanted to be saved. On Wednesday night, I was preaching to the people who wanted to go deep in God—so you had to bring some outlandish revelation. And then on Saturday, I was teaching at a leadership internship. I did it for eight months, and it about killed me."

When the pastor returned, he started to take back some of his

usual workload—but not all of it. While McIntosh regained his strength, he and Todd decided they would split the sermon load 50/50.

“It ended up being more like I would do three weekends a month and he would do one,” Todd jokes.

But soon Todd felt something worse than burnout: stagnation. He started to grow concerned that GCC lacked a vision for the future and wondered if God was calling him away from ministry and back into music producing. After all, he’d never intended to be a pastor long term. He went to meet with McIntosh and told him his season had come to an end. McIntosh disagreed.

“I don’t have the vision for the next season,” McIntosh told him. “I believe you do.”

Todd did not like the direction this was going: “I literally told him verbatim, ‘I don’t think I could be a pastor to a church. I don’t even like people that much.’”

“I’ve seen you do it,” McIntosh replied. “I’ve watched it over the past two years. You raised up a leadership team of 12 people who committed three years of their life to this and never got a dime. You taught the hardest demographic in church—which is young people—to give, and by the end of your time [at SO FLY], the youth were giving \$9,000 to \$10,000 a month. We were able to hire a youth coordinator off of what they were giving.”

As McIntosh chronicled all of Todd’s achievements, Todd realized God had been training and equipping him for years to serve as Transformation Church’s next pastor. He was still hesitant, but when McIntosh told him it would be a five-year leadership transition, Todd agreed.

That will give me time to go to seminary or college and to learn some more stuff, Todd thought.

Shortly after that, in September 2014, McIntosh announced to the congregation that Todd would assume the lead pastor position in one year. Todd was flabbergasted. But the one-year period didn't actually happen.

Instead, Todd became the lead pastor on Feb. 1, 2015.

It wasn't the transition he'd imagined or planned. But Todd says God was in it.

"All I can tell you is that there was a supernatural grace that came over my life," Todd says. "God put me in rooms and in relationships with the right people who could give me what I needed when I needed it. We've just been faithful in stewarding Transformation Church. When I took over, we started in a converted grocery store with 350 people and a very small budget. Since then, God has expanded our influence to be able to help a lot of people see transformation in Christ. So we're just grateful, and we're super humbled."

Obedience and Rewards

But the turning point for Transformation Church didn't happen until more than two years later, during which time God was preparing Todd—and also testing his willingness to obey. Todd says he was happy to just survive 2015, his first year as lead pastor. During that year, he says he felt led by God to start an \$80,000 capital campaign to buy new cameras—a controversial decision that ended with some people leaving the church. Todd was sorry to see them go but still felt strongly that God had told him to do this. The church began recording every sermon and putting it on YouTube—but he says almost no one watched them, with single-digit views on many uploads.

The next year, Transformation Church was blessed with growth.

"In 2016, God told us to go beyond, and our church grew 400 people, and our budget grew \$400,000," Todd says. "As a 27-year old church planter, I felt like we were on top of the

world. So I was ready to keep going.”

In October 2017, Todd received a surprise call from Elevation Church Pastor Steven Furtick. Todd had adapted one of Furtick’s sermons and used it at his church, and when Furtick went searching for video of his own message, he found Todd’s instead.

“He watched it and sent me a minute and 41 second voicemail,” Todd remembers. “He said, ‘I don’t know who you are. But I just want to let you know you’re called. You’re anointed.’ And I’m, like, dying. I’m thinking, *What is going on? What is real life right now?*”

But in December 2017, Todd faced a real test. He felt the Holy Spirit telling him, *It’s time for you to stride*. Todd looked up the term “stride,” which means to walk in long, decisive steps in an intentional direction. After discussing it with his oversight pastor, Tim Ross, they agreed that God was telling Todd to slow down his pace.

“Jesus fulfilled every messianic prophecy ever spoken about Him, and he did it in three years,” Todd says. “Yet you never hear about him running to his next appointment. He walked everywhere. ‘And they walked to Samaria.’ ‘And they walked to Judea.’ If I only had three years, I would have at least had a horse or a donkey or something to help me get there faster. But Jesus found the pace of grace. So I really embraced that, like, *What does that mean?* It means less is more. You do what you’re supposed to do instead of doing everything. Our culture tells us to grind, hustle, network and do all these other things. But honestly, you can’t beat the pace of grace.”

As a result of this word, Todd felt convicted that the church needed to cancel several events—including all of the upcoming Christmas festivities at Transformation Church. He remembers gathering the staff on Dec. 6 to announce he was “canceling Christmas.”

"You know, for a church, Christmas and Easter are like the Super Bowl," Todd says. "We want pyrotechnics, tattoos that say 'I love Jesus' and the whole nine yards. You know what I'm saying? ... But you don't have to understand to obey."

In hindsight, Todd believes he passed a spiritual test of obedience in that moment: *"It was almost as if God was like, I just needed to make sure that I had your heart and you will obey. Because I want you to know that what I'm about to do has nothing to do with your ability. It has everything to do with your obedience."*

A couple of weeks later, a girl posted a two-minute sermon clip of Todd on Twitter. The girl did not go to Transformation Church, and Todd has no idea how she found out about him. The clip itself was from a sermon series that was four months old, titled *Relationship Goals*, posted on the church's YouTube channel.

Within 48 hours, the video had been watched 2 million times.

Overnight, hundreds of thousands of young people began asking who this young pastor was and where they could hear more sermons from him. They found the YouTube channel and began binging years' worth of recorded sermons. The videos—which had languished at low hits for years—were suddenly viewed tens of thousands of times.

Todd hadn't done a thing, and in fact, says he did not even realize what was happening for several days.

"I remember sitting there with my wife at P.F. Chang's for dinner on a date night," Todd says. "And I told her, 'Babe, I remember having 4,000 Instagram followers, and it just went to 14,000 in one day. I think Instagram is broken.' ... I got 10,000 new followers every day for a week. It was stupid. And I had no idea what had happened yet."

Over the next month, Todd went from 4,000 Instagram followers

to nearly 100,000; the church's YouTube page grew from 1,800 subscribers to 120,000.

"People ask us all the time, 'Who did y'all hire? Who were your marketing directors?'" Todd says. "The people who were consuming the content were cutting those videos themselves and editing them and putting them on both Facebook and YouTube. We didn't have the team, staff or the foresight to do any of that. So that's how you know it was really a God thing."

After Todd's viral moment, Furtick called him again and invited him to preach the weekend after Easter at Elevation Church. A few months later, a video of that sermon was posted online, and it went viral too. That opened even more doors for Todd, including preaching at other churches and conferences.

Despite the growing platform, Todd says he's striving to keep his eyes on what matters most. Twitter puts a blue checkmark next to celebrity accounts that have been "verified" as authentic (in order to prevent fraudulent accounts). Despite hundreds of thousands of followers, Todd is not verified—and he's OK with that.

"I'm unverified, which is kind of like a cool thing for me," Todd says. "Like, I don't even have to be verified, because we were verified by God. We're just trying to be faithful to the lane God's put us in to represent Him to the lost and found for transformation in Christ." {eoa}

To read more about Michael Todd, pick up the June/July 2020 issue of Charisma magazine. You can subscribe [here](#).

Taylor Berglund is the associate editor of Charisma magazine and host of several shows on the Charisma Podcast Network.