

Why Are So Many Charismatic Conferences Ending?

When Mike Bickle and his team at the International House of Prayer (IHOP) decided to indefinitely suspend their popular Onething conference late last year, Bickle didn't realize his decision was the most recent example of a curious trend in charismatic ministries. Throughout 2018, Spirit-filled ministries around the world announced the end of beloved programs, conferences or even the entire ministry. The decisions came not due to scandal, bankruptcy or lack of success—rather, each one came because God told them to end it.

But Bickle couldn't have known this two to three years ago, when he first began seriously mulling a reset for IHOP. The Onething conference got its name from Luke 10:42, in which Jesus told Martha, "One thing is needed. And Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken from her."

In an ironic twist, over its 19 years of operation, Onething had become more emblematic of Martha than Mary, as IHOP staff so cheerfully busied themselves with innumerable ministries and conferences that their own spiritual and interpersonal relationships were neglected. Bickle could sense the advent of the writing on the wall.

"In the IHOP world, we've got more and more activity and more and more people visiting," Bickle says. "Our footprint globally is growing. We're busy bees, and we've drifted from the Mary of Bethany heart-response as a core response in our ministry. In the early years, this was so big to everybody, and so everyone would agree that we were not actually walking it out."

Bickle says the Lord made it clear to him last summer that radical steps were needed. IHOP needed a reset, and that meant

nonessential activities and events must be removed. That included Onething, an annual conference that drew over 20,000 people each year for the last 10 years. Onething was IHOP's biggest conference of the year, and Bickle says it motivated more people to join their Bible school and staff than any other single event.

Yet if IHOP was to truly focus on the one thing, Onething had to go. So did every other IHOP conference.

"The Lord just said, 'I want you to reconnect on this,'" Bickle says. "'Draw back. Go deep with Me, and then second, go deep with one another in community and family. Let's spend more time talking and interacting with each other and with Me, and then I'll breathe on you, and I'll help you go back to more increased activity in the future.' The activities are good. There's nothing wrong with the activities. But all of them together meant we're weren't spending quality time with the Lord like we used to, and we weren't spending the quality time with each other that's necessary for the kingdom community to operate."

In early October, Bickle announced in an online video that IHOP would "reset," but didn't provide details until a November video clarified that Onething 2019 would be the final Onething. Between those videos, Lou Engle surprised Bickle and the rest of the Spirit-filled world with announcement of his own: TheCall would end in preparation for his new ministry, The Send.

Just two weeks before Onething, Bickle heard news that Soul Survivor—an influential, annual charismatic event in the United Kingdom helmed by Mike Pilavachi—was ending for good after its summer 2019 conferences.

"I love Mike Pilavachi," Bickle says. "We've become real good friends over the years. I had no idea he was ending. Three people told me that, [and] I went, 'Really? Why?' I asked the

same questions everyone's asking me: 'Why? What's the real reason?'"

And during Onething 2019, Bickle met his friend Dr. Johannes Hartl, founder of the Augsburg Prayer House (known in Germany as *Gebetshaus Augsburg*). The ministry hosted an annual Spirit-filled conference called MEHRS which reached over 10,000 people annually—at least until Hartl and his team heard God telling them to cancel this year's conference.

"I was quite surprised by this," Bickle says. "I heard these stories one by one and went, 'No way!' Each one of them completely surprised me. We made our decision in a vacuum. We were not communicating with others about this."

With so many Spirit-filled conferences and ministries voluntarily closing down, *Charisma* spoke to these ministry leaders to learn what the Holy Spirit is doing and how these endings pave the way for the next generation of charismatics.

Unique Endings

Soul Survivor first began in summer 1993, after Pilavachi—who was then the youth pastor of St. Andrew's Church, an Anglican church in Chorleywood, England—got the idea to plant a church in Warford and start a festival in Somerset. Both ministries—distinct yet sharing the name "Soul Survivor"—were focused on reaching unchurched people for Christ. Pilavachi described his vision as an event "where we don't take ourselves seriously, but we take Jesus very seriously."

The first festival drew 1,893 young people, stunning Pilavachi and his team. Attendance incrementally increased by thousands each year. In recent years, Soul Survivor has held four conferences across England and Scotland every summer, drawing over 30,000 attendees per year. Despite Pilavachi's Anglican roots, the conferences are also unabashedly charismatic, drawing heavily on the influence of the Vineyard Movement and its late founder, John Wimber.

“What we wanted to do was be open to the ministry and the power of the Holy Spirit but also make it as accessible as possible,” Pilavachi says. “Our heart was for young people to have an encounter—‘encounter’ was one of our key words—but also for that encounter to be accessible—not spiritual, not super weird. So our job was always to explain as much as we could what was going on, even if a lot of times I just had to say, ‘You know what? I don’t know what’s going on; you don’t either, but Jesus sent His Holy Spirit, so we’re going to trust it’s Him and find out what happened from the people afterwards.’ We created an atmosphere of family and community, an atmosphere where young people knew they weren’t going to be manipulated or hyped up.”

Pilavachi says his great joy as an old man is that almost every day he receives letters, emails and Facebook messages from people who tell him they became Christians at Soul Survivor and are now serving the kingdom. But four years ago, Pilavachi began wondering if a 60-year old was really the best leader for a youth movement. He told his leadership team he felt it was time for him to move on—though he would continue pastoring his home church, Soul Survivor Watford.

He assumed the conferences’ leadership mantle would fall to Andy Croft, a Cambridge graduate and former intern for Pilavachi who ascended over 14 years to become a key leader. But Croft sensed God was telling him to reject the leadership role, feeling called to the local church rather than the conferences. So the leadership team began looking at an outside hire. It was not something Pilavachi felt comfortable with.

“We’re trying to move away from the whole process of businesses hiring and firing employees,” Pilavachi says. “In a business, you do that. In a church, you raise up sons and daughters. ... Too many churches are looking for the finished product. We have to make space for people to grow and develop. If you have a 6- year-old, and you tell them to load the

dishwasher, and they do a bad job, you don't sit them down and say, 'I'm sorry, but you did a bad job. We have to let you go. We're bringing in a new 6-year-old from across the way.' No, you teach them. You go through the process. You do it with them until they've got it."

Pilavachi, who has spoken publicly about his distaste for ministries "hiring the best" from other ministries, hoped to avoid that for Soul Survivor. The team agreed. But then several team members came to Pilavachi individually and told him, "When you stop, Mike, I will stop."

Croft, in particular, told Pilavachi, "When God spoke to me, He never said, 'It was about Soul Survivor.' It was about serving with you."

With a whole team ready to leave, Pilavachi realized any outside hire would simply be set up to fail. Then he asked the hardest question: "Is the Lord saying we should stop?"

"When we first asked that question, I told the board, 'It can't be,'" Pilavachi says. "'We can't stop. What about the kids? What will happen to them? There's 28,000 of them. There's nothing else that happens like this.' Then two days later, the Lord spoke to me so clearly, in the nature of a little rebuke. He said to me, 'When did they become your kids? When did they become your responsibility? They're My kids. They're My responsibility. I will look after them.' Then a weight lifted off me. I said, 'God, if You say to stop, then You know what You're doing. We're not You. We're here to serve You.'"

The Soul Survivor leadership team prayed separately, came back together and agreed God was instructing them to end the ministry. But they waited three months before making the official announcement. In that time, Pilavachi had the decision prophetically confirmed.

"Before we said anything to anyone, we were getting prophetic

words from people all over the world saying the same thing," Pilavachi says. "Someone in New Zealand told me, 'I see you as a trapeze artist. The Lord is saying you have to let go of the last trapeze in order to catch the next one.' Someone who didn't know us told us, 'I could be wrong, but God wants you to lay this thing down, and as you lay it down, God will show you the next thing He has for you.' This kept happening. It became clear. So it became easy."

In June 2018, Soul Survivor announced its 2019 events would be the final conferences. Pilavachi says he's both excited and at peace with the decision, though it's not one he expected to make.

"I said it at the festivals years ago: 'I hope one day God tells us to stop, and when He does we will be obedient,'" Pilavachi says. "The one thing I always said was, 'God never said, 'I'll build my Soul Survivor.'" He said, "I'll build my church." We always felt we were here for a season to build the church, and for as long as God wants us, we will be here, but as soon as God wants us to hand off the reins, we're done. And that's what we did."

Likewise, Engle didn't know 2018 was the year he would end TheCall, but for seven years, he says, he held the ministry with open hands before God—knowing something would eventually happen. In 2011, Engle and several members of his inner circle gathered in his Kansas City living room to pray over what the Lord was stirring in their hearts. The group felt the Lord tell them, "There's coming a shift to TheCall, and there will not be just fasting and prayer, but the proclamation of the gospel, signs and wonders, and stadiums will rebuild, and Billy Graham's mantle is coming on the nation."

Shortly before the 2018 death of Billy Graham, Engle began to pray for the next generation to receive a double portion of the renowned preacher's evangelistic anointing. The Send—a new movement that held its first event Feb. 23 in Orlando,

Florida—is the fulfillment of both those prayers and the 18-year ministry of TheCall. In an online letter to supporters, Engle explained that the Holy Spirit told him he needed to “end TheCall” so he could shift his focus to what Christ is doing now.

“The Lord encountered me on Easter morning of this year,” Engle says. “I felt strongly that unless a seed go into the ground and die, it cannot bear fruit, and that TheCall must die to bring forth resurrection power in America. For the last 20 years, God has used TheCall to gather hundreds of thousands in a John the Baptist-type movement to fast and pray in preparation for a Third Great Awakening. I am now convinced that TheCall must come to a glorious end. I celebrate this moment in my heart as I know what will come forth in the next generation as I pour myself out into sons and daughters for a new Jesus Movement and reformation in America.”

Hartl’s story of cancelling the 2019 MEHR conference looks different than Pilavachi and Engle’s—for one, MEHR is continuing, albeit less frequently than before. Still, the announcement of MEHR’s hiatus caught many in both the church and secular world by surprise, given the conference’s rapid success and growth. The first conference took place in 2008 with 120 people. After 10 years, MEHR 2018 drew over 11,000 people in person, with another 500,000 following on TV and radio or streaming it online.

Yet Hartl discovered the same lesson Bickle and IHOP were learning on the other side of the globe—success can make you lose focus on what’s most important. The Holy Spirit intervened.

“After a very busy year and a case of burnout in our leadership team, we took four weeks at the beginning of the year to seek God for direction,” Hartl says. “It felt like there might be a shift in the season. I personally clearly felt that the next year was not supposed to be ‘business as

usual.' So when we as a staff team came back together after four weeks, almost everybody agreed it was an important step to cancel the next conference and reduce some other meetings. This was a radical but very important step."

Hartl's MEHR conference will return in 2020, but it will happen less frequently than it did in the past. In its place for 2019, Hartl and his team will hold a smaller conference called SCHÄ~N (German for "beauty"), designed to build a bridge between the Christian and secular communities.

Full Circle

Though the stories of these decisions share similar themes and contours, none of the decision makers involved knew of the other cases. In fact, Pilavachi only learned TheCall had ended during his interview with *Charisma*.

"I only found out [about Onething] last week," Pilavachi says. "I just know God spoke to us and, knowing Mike, I know he would have sought the Lord, heard the Lord and tried to be obedient to Him. I'm sure the guys at TheCall did the same."

In his 40 years of ministry, Bickle says he's seen only one other move of God parallel these mass closings: the mass openings of houses of prayer 20 years ago.

"I haven't seen a wave like this before—with one exception: in the prayer ministry," Bickle says. "Twenty years ago when we started, I could think of a couple of prayer ministries on the earth that were going hard. ... Then we started this, and within the next five years I ran into people who did not know us and we did not know them, and they all started their prayer ministries in a similar time frame that we did—1999, just like us. There was a huge growth spurt in 1999 with the 24/7 prayer movement. They were not started because we inspired them or repeated what they did. None of us knew each other. They just all started."

Bickle says official numbers are hard to pin down, but he's heard reliable estimates that suggest that as of 1985, there were 25 24-hour prayer rooms in the entire world. Today, there are over 20,000—and possibly more, depending how you interpret data from regions like Southern Africa and China.

“The number is unbelievable,” Bickle says. “There was no memo that was sent. It just all began. I'm sure some of them were inspired by others, but for many of them it was a grassroots display and evidence of the Holy Spirit. I'm always blown away by that fact.”

If the Holy Spirit could spontaneously begin all of these ministries, it seems plausible to believe He could end them just as abruptly if the season changed. Ending at the height of success seems like madness to the outside world—and even to many inside the church. But Hartl says this broader move is evidence that the Holy Spirit is leading ministries away from a business-style mentality of success and growth into a more relational model.

“God is not in the business of building ministries,” Hartl says. “He is building real people and real family. I believe there is a shift away from a worker mentality and a performance-driven ministry culture happening right now. The Lord really is very tender. He doesn't use us as 'tools.' He wants us to be friends with Him and each other. But relationships take time. It is about a revelation of the family of God, where we find our identity in our being, not in our doing. I sense the Holy Spirit emphasizing this worldwide right now.”

Many Christians are quick to assume the worst if a ministry ends—because sinful scandal makes more sense than ending a good thing. But endings don't have to indicate moral or economic failure. In fact, Pilavachi points out that in many ways, Jesus defied conventional models of success.

"I think in the church of Jesus we're very good at starting things," Pilavachi says. "We're hopeless at ending them. Too many things go way past their sell-by date or best-before date. It's about being obedient. You know, Jesus—if you look at His life—as soon as He gathered a crowd, ... He'd say, 'Let's go from this place to some town or village where I'm not known.' Jesus, that's not very strategic. Where's your PR consultant? You're building something here and then you're leaving. But we need to get back to those Jesus principles. Otherwise, we're going to end up with not disciples, but consumers."

New Beginnings

Many will view news of these conferences and ministries ending or going on hiatus as bad news. But most of the leaders involved view them as positive developments for a couple of key reasons.

First, doing less allows the ministries to return to their original focus—and do that even better. Bickle says he's pleasantly surprised by this trend and views it as an opportunity to reassess what's truly important.

"I'm just encouraged that a lot of folks are pausing," Bickle says. "It's really a pause to do a reset. It's pausing to say 'business as usual' is not okay. Just growing numerically is not enough. If we're not growing closer to the Lord and deeper true-kingdom relationships, then growing numerically leaves me empty. ... I'm 63 years old, so I've been in ministry over 40 years. Just having a lot of people in the room doesn't really grab my attention like it used to 25 years ago. If the arrow's not moving forward, and we're still the same, I'm just not interested."

Second, endings create a space for new, younger leaders and ministries to come into their own, with the full backing and support of the previous generation. It's a pattern God

designed in nature itself: The sun must go down on one day so it can rise on another. Already, Pilavachi has seen the end of Soul Survivor will spawn three new Spirit-filled conferences in its place—led by young leaders who grew up in Soul Survivor. He's determined to use his final year to help them get a running start.

"This summer, we're going to hand over the baton to them," Pilavachi says. "From the three of these leaders, there are three groups that are going to start something, and they're going to come to our 2019 festivals. We're going to introduce them. We're going to tell everyone we think they're wonderful, and we'll give them a chance to lead a bit. Then the following year, in 2020, I will visit each one of them for a day and just wander around [their conference], being encouraging as much as I can. And I'm thrilled. I'm convinced they'll do a better job than we could do in the coming years."

And though TheCall is most obviously leading to The Send movement, that's not the only ministry birthed out of TheCall's end. Engle himself will lead Lou Engle Ministries. His friends and ministry partners Paul and Cheryl Amabile will launch The Briefing to promote prophetic words and intercession. Finally, Engle says he is releasing his spiritual son and daughter, David and Audry Kim, to lead a movement called Contend, which Engle says "will take a double portion of TheCall's DNA and message of fasting, prayer and Nazirite consecration to the next generation and beyond."

"For 18 years, I have never looked to build a ministry or a name, only to see America turn back to God and to help ignite missions and prayer in the nations," Engle says. "This is my legacy: I am looking to the next generation of sons and daughters to carry this nation into its full purposes."

With Onething on indefinite hiatus—Bickle says it will be "many years, at least five" before he'd consider revisiting it—IHOP can pursue relational intimacy with God and refocus on

its 24-hour prayer ministry. Bickle calls it a shift to quality over quantity: faithfully executing God's original call to ministry with narrowed focus and heightened excellence.

Pilavachi says he remains as excited as ever about the future of the charismatic movement.

"A number of people have asked me and said, 'Won't you be sad? Won't there be something missing in your life?'" Pilavachi says. "The honest truth is we started it out of obedience. We believe we're finishing it out of obedience. So it's not difficult. Obviously, we'll miss it, but we're not stopping doing ministry. We're not stopping serving Jesus. We're just stopping doing this.

"For me, my life's never been about Soul Survivor; it's about Jesus. And the last I checked in, He's not stopping next summer. He's still carrying on. That's all that matters."

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