

A Fire Burns In England

The revival that erupted in Sunderland, England, in 1994 still blazes. But pastors Ken and Lois Gott have transformed spiritual passion into evangelism.

Luke declares he has been “totally changed”—then drops to the floor like a puppet whose strings have been cut. The effect ricochets across the room as another young man falls across a row of chairs.

Mary, a girl with one arm, explains how she used to despise beautiful women—but now leads a cell group full of them. Another girl, Jenny, says she gave up her planned career in the United Nations because “God is moving in this place.”

These young people are among those sharing their stories at one of the three regular Sunday meetings of Metro Church International in northeast England. Though the new name may be unfamiliar, the pastors of this 650-person congregation commanded international attention during the mid-1990s as leaders of the “Sunderland Refreshing.”

Back then, the floor of their church, Sunderland Christian Centre, was often covered with bodies—some motionless, some shaking uncontrollably—and the room was filled with weeping, shouting and laughter. Visitors from across Great Britain—and the globe—who embarked on “revival hopping” tours would stop off at the Assemblies of God church. It was a strategic “filling station” for the spiritually thirsty.

Senior pastors Ken and Lois Gott remember it well. “We have been totally and utterly shocked at the impact because we were just getting on with it and loving what God was doing—as we

are now," Lois says. "We had no idea how far-reaching it was."

Ken agrees. "We were just hosting the Holy Ghost and not realizing the people who were coming and what their ministry was. They were just lying on our carpet. There is no doubt that major ministries and nations were affected."

The manifestations still occur, but the Gotts point out they are not the main focus—the testimonies are. Visitors still come to see what is happening, but the phenomenon is no longer the shaking—it's the soul winning. According to Lois, the teenagers are producing a harvest "faster than any other group in the church."

They are certainly radical worshipers. As soon as the band kicks in—with rock songs that speak of God's holiness and power—a group of young people storm the stage and break into a choreographed routine of aggressive, physical praise.

"My Lord is holy, holy, holy," they cry, pounding the floor with their feet and punching the air with their fists.

The praise becomes a tidal wave of intense emotion. Even a hardened cynic would find it a challenge to resist being caught up in its swell. Some of the faithful from the heady days of the renewal can be spotted around the hall, still soaking up the rich environment. But there is a subtle difference in them all.

The party is over. The war has begun.

A Paradigm Shift

The strategy has completely changed. Ken still gives an appeal early in the service for those who want healing or “a touch of God,” and a surge of people hungry for the Holy Spirit respond.

But Sunday is like a big tribal gathering. All the hard work of discipleship and evangelism goes on in cells during the week.

This isn't the standard “charismatic church with small groups attached.” Ken and Lois have adopted the so-called G12 method from Misión Carismática Internacional—reportedly the fastest growing church in the world—located in Bogotá, Colombia. Creating and multiplying cells of 12 is the lifeblood of their congregation.

The paradigm shift can be traced back to April 1998, when the Gotts were invited to speak at the United Kingdom's annual Assemblies of God conference held in North Wales. “We had a staff, and we were basically traveling all over the place,” Ken recalls. “We had very strong links with Pensacola and Toronto. To tell you the truth, we were very happy.”

The Sunderland Refreshing had propelled them into the limelight. They had handed over their home church to other leaders and had become globe-trotting revivalists.

“We felt we had a very strong mandate from the Lord to spread this new fire and passion—and He was blessing it incredibly,” Ken explains.

Also speaking at the conference was Cesar Castellanos, pastor

of the Bogotá church. Ken had read about him in Charisma and agreed to meet with the Colombian church leader for coffee after one of the conference sessions—more out of politeness than enthusiasm.

“It was simply the Assemblies of God wanting me to tell him about what happened in Sunderland,” Ken says. “I was wheeled out as a kind of a trophy.”

So with the help of an interpreter, he told Castellanos all about the renewal, how people from other countries had been impacted, and how he and Lois had been traveling the world.

The Bogotá pastor didn't seem impressed at all with the fact that the Gotts had been holding revival meetings in increasingly larger venues across the globe.

“He was very courteous. When I'd finished talking he asked, 'Why are you doing this?' And I said that I believe it's what the Lord wants us to do, and we're fulfilling a need.

“He said: 'This is what it's like, Ken. If there's a pile of bricks, what you do is you come along and you bless that pile of bricks, and they feel really blessed. But when you walk away they are still a pile of bricks. They don't change at all. They don't form anything. They don't build into anything.'”

Castellanos issued a big challenge to the Gotts: “Why have you forsaken your entrustments to pursue those other enticements? Can you find it in your heart to dismiss the crowds, go back home and start building the church again?”

The message hit home. Ken and Lois always pulled crowds—and now they were being urged to dismiss them!

Strangely enough, Ken had also been preaching about the entrustments of God and the enticements that distract people from their callings.

Castellanos went on to encourage him and his wife to disciple 12 people who could then each find another 12 to mentor. By following Jesus' pattern of discipleship, they would eventually impact their region for God, Castellanos said.

Before they parted company, Ken asked Castellanos to pray for them. They were ready to receive a "power encounter" from this man of God.

But instead of declaring victory and triumph over them, the Colombian church leader wept on Ken's shoulder! The fact that he ministered from a position of brokenness really impressed the Gotts.

Castellanos' message seemed to confirm what the couple already had been thinking, so they returned home with a plan. Before they could carry it out, however, there were a few issues to resolve.

Ken had 18 months' worth of speaking engagements filling up his schedule, a staff of 15 in his office and five churches he had planted and already entrusted to other leaders.

Radical Changes

The Gotts explained to their team what they believed God had been saying to them. Many staff members found alternative employment; others found clear direction for the way ahead. The Gotts canceled as many engagements as they could and honored the rest.

“The train took about a year to stop,” Ken remembers.

But they weren’t sure what to do about their church. They didn’t feel right in asking for their congregations back—so they started again from scratch.

“They’d been running with their visions for two years,” Ken says of the leaders they had entrusted with their flock. “There was ownership. We said the only thing we could do was pick up a remnant that were kind of floating around and hadn’t quite fitted in.”

They rented a room at the Marriott Hotel in Newcastle’s Metro Center—a vast shopping mall that draws consumers from across Western Europe—borrowed a sound system and started a church with about 50 others. Visitors still traveled from around the world to see what the Gotts were up to.

But instead of finding great conference speakers spearheading a successful church, they found a small number of worshipers in a hotel room.

“They would think, What is going on here?” Ken says. “Then they would come up to us afterwards and say, ‘We believe you are doing the right thing.’ It was kind of humoring us, and yet it was very humbling.”

It was a time of “putting to death” many things the Gotts had previously considered important. They believed God was changing their value system and giving them a new understanding of what He wanted for His church. Several months later they issued the same challenge to the leaders of three of their churches: demolish and rebuild.

“We built relationally with these guys, and then we challenged them to do what we had done—die to whatever they were doing, come in with us and build this cell church together. They all did it. It was amazing.”

A key element in this rebuilding process has been what they call “encounter weekends.” Held from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon, the events enable participants to focus on the cross and consider what their sins did to Jesus.

The results are dynamic. Cleansing, inner healing and deliverance are producing fiery disciples.

“You wouldn’t believe the things that happen at encounter weekends,” Lois explains. “People are in corners weeping. It’s personal. The only time we come together is at the cross, where we write a letter to Jesus. We have the most powerful encounters, but it’s producing everlasting fruit.”

The events are like an extension of the renewal, when people would do “carpet time” and later speak of being set free from deep problems. The Gotts admit there is an echo from the refreshing.

“I think the passion and the zeal is all there,” Ken says. “The big difference is the pursuit of the lost. We didn’t have

much of that in the renewal.”

In Ken’s words, “The renewal did a job on us all.” This latest phase is taking them to a deeper level, however, as well as preparing people for service. “We are making leaders. We’ve got loads and loads of people going on encounter weekends and being cleaned up.”

Lois points out that Jesus said go and make disciples—not go and preach to crowds. “So we felt that the church is ready,” she adds. “Everybody is really winning souls.”

Two years ago, another event occurred that radically altered the course of the Gotts’ lives. They adopted a baby.

“Having a little newborn in your house prevents you from doing a whole lot of things,” Lois says, “and one of them is jetting around the world. So she was a sign to us of the new thing.”

In 1995, American prophetic minister Cathy Lechner told Lois a baby would be put in her arms as a sign of a new thing still to come—yet that was in the midst of renewal. The Gotts had two grown-up daughters, and Lois had been told she couldn’t have any more children.

Years later a pregnant woman who was addicted to drugs wandered into a church at Stockton-on-Tees, claiming to have received a vision from God. There she became a Christian and gave up her drug habit. The leaders had adopted children themselves, so she asked if they would help her find a mother for her baby.

"I was having a ladies meeting, and this pastor's wife came up and said would I consider taking a baby," Lois recalled. "It was out of the blue."

She and Ken prayed about it. Remembering Lechner's prophecy, they agreed to adopt the baby.

The mother requested that her baby be put straight into Lois' arms within hours of the birth. Lois felt that was a fulfillment of the prophecy. Rachel is now 2 years old.

"If there was ever any doubt that we made a right decision in this, we just look at her every day," Ken says. "She's a sign and a wonder."

Anglican leader Robert Ward, who runs renewal conferences in northeastern England, describes the Gotts themselves as "a biblical phenomenon." He spoke to Charisma after attending one of their Sunday services at the Northumbria Center, Sunderland.

"They're reinventing the wheel," he says. "They're breaking all the molds."

"I'm a Southerner, and the Northeast would be regarded as a socially and economically devastated region. It's just like God to take Sunderland—which was rejected by the power bases in the Southeast—and to use His glory in a way that is of biblical proportions."

Nearly a decade ago, Sunderland hosted a renewal. If the G12 strategy helps shake the region, it could be hosting a

reformation. “I don’t think Jesus came to fill churches,” Ken explains. “Jesus came to rock cities. If I have an ultimate goal and a dream, it is to see a city totally transformed.”

The Gotts believe they have returned to help finish the job of influencing the city for God. “In 1901 at the original revival with Smith Wigglesworth, the headline of the local newspaper was, ‘The eyes of the religious world are now on Sunderland.’ I think God repeated that in 1994. What we are saying is—keep looking at us.”

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How Revival ‘Ruined’ a Church

Pastor Ken Gott says his Pentecostal traditions were turned upside down when the Holy Spirit descended in fresh power.

Pentecostal minister Ken Gott found himself spiritually bankrupt in 1994. The former policeman was seeking a deeper experience with God. His search resulted in his falling on the floor of Holy Trinity Brompton, an Anglican church in London’s fashionable Knightsbridge district, and laughing uncontrollably.

After this liberating event he took a trip to Canada, where he met John Arnott, leader of the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship.

“That meeting in a tiny building at the end of an airport runway changed my life,” Gott says. “The Holy Spirit ruined a perfectly good church—and devastated this Pentecostal preacher in his sharp suits and ties!”

At the height of the renewal, from 300 to 600 people descended on Sunderland Christian Centre six nights a week. There was a raw excitement at the meetings, where visitors could not help being carried on the wave of joy that swept through Gott’s church, located in England’s “cradle of Christianity.”

Here, the hard spiritual ground had once been broken by Smith Wigglesworth—and centuries before, by the Celtic saints who preceded him. As American revivalist Tommy Tenney put it recently, “The veil is thin over this region.”

Gott thanked God for the “refreshing” but knew even then that it was pointing to something greater, just as John the Baptist pointed to Jesus. “We want to live revival, speak revival, sleep revival, read revival—we want every minute of our lives to be obsessed with revival,” he declared during the late 1990s.