

God Is in the House!

A fresh move of the Holy Spirit hit First Assembly of God in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, four years ago. Now the once-traditional church is a hub of revival in the Midwest.

Raw enthusiasm for God thrusts the atmosphere of praise to a new level during the Friday Night Alive service at First Assembly of God in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. People of all ages have gathered together to seek God. Some have come from across the street, others from across the state. But one thing they have in common: worshiping God with abandon.

The 1,000 people here tonight express worship in a variety of ways. Some shout, clap and blur the aisles, twirling and hopping as the band energetically pounds through a contemporary rock-style praise song. A woman on the timpani grooves while playing her drum. Choir members dance in the loft while other men and women lay still on the floor, soaking in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It has been like this for four years, ever since pastor Larry Sohn initiated Friday night services as a way to feed and refresh his congregation, which had entered a season of unprecedented revival. Now, even as many other churches have seen their Friday night services wane, First Assembly is going strong.

Some call it a watering hole for the Midwest. Many others know it as the place where God dramatically changed their lives. One thing is certain: At First Assembly, God is in the house.

"Tonight is your night to be free," Sohn declares, after the congregation gives the Lord a full four-minute clap offering. The worship time, which has transitioned from exuberance to reverence and back again, comes to a formal end 70 minutes after it began, when everyone is seated for the first time.

Instead of going right into a sermon, Sohn invites people forward to give their testimonies. A young woman tells how her marriage was restored. "I open my Bible, and He's there. I open my heart, and He talks to me," she says.

A Southern Baptist pastor and his wife from halfway across the state tell how they have attended Friday services regularly for three years. An Assemblies of God pastor and his wife from Missouri, both in their 60s, share how they have been renewed in the ministry, claiming that God unexpectedly blessed the woman with a gold tooth after a conference at First Assembly.

Some time after 9 p.m., Sohn preaches a straightforward sermon about God's grace, pacing and wiping his face with a handkerchief. He is as intense from the pulpit as he is in person. After an hour he gives an altar call for people who want to be saved, set free from besetting sin or healed.

But the service is nowhere near ending. At 10:30 p.m., people are still lining up for prayer. A worship CD has replaced the live band. Children sleep on the pews while people socialize and gather purses and Bibles. Many approach the Missouri pastor's wife to see her gold tooth, and she agreeably displays her miracle time and again.

Judy Sohn, Larry's wife, continues to pray for people in the aisles, and those wanting prayer are content to receive it in

the midst of lighter conversations. Larry has prayed his way underneath the balcony near the foyer and pauses to observe the hundreds still here. With a sense of awe he quietly remarks, "I marvel that people still come."

The Birth of a Revival

Sohn has pastored First Assembly for nine years. He had his first brush with the outpouring of the Spirit in the 1990s when, in 1994, he attended a Rodney Howard-Browne meeting in St. Louis. God touched him powerfully when he received prayer at the end of the service.

"All the pressure I didn't know I had came out," Sohn told Charisma. "I was free. It was like being born again."

As he prayed for people the following Sunday morning at his own church, many people instantly fell over as they were overpowered by the Holy Spirit. This was unusual for a church in which more than half of the people had come from Catholic backgrounds and most had not experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

"I realized that for all those years, I was laying empty hands on empty lives," Sohn says. "Suddenly, I was laying hands on people, but my hands weren't empty. The Holy Spirit in me was touching them. It was an amazement to me."

But as suddenly as it came, that sense of God's immediate presence lifted and Sohn went through a difficult year of seeking God. He felt that somehow he had grieved the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, he preached on revival and told First Assembly that it was coming.

Then in January 1996, an elderly pastor pulled Sohn aside at a sectional meeting. Weeping, the man told him God had given him a vision that He would visit First Assembly and that if Sohn opened his heart to it, God would bring people from other states; but if he closed his heart to it, the Spirit would lift and the church would dwindle to nothing. Sohn promptly forgot the vision because, he says, it was “so bizarre.”

A month later, his youth pastor brought a video of a service at Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola, Florida, to a staff meeting. And that’s when things started to change.

“We watched it, and I started weeping,” Sohn says. “The same Spirit that had come on me the year earlier came on me again. I instantly recognized the presence of God.”

He rented the largest screen he could find in the city and showed the video on Sunday morning—a high risk for a church that promoted itself in the community as “a safe place.”

“I had to expose them to God,” Sohn says. “I preached that revival is now.”

Melody Graham, 38, a local college professor, was there that morning. “The church was stunned,” she says. “I’d never seen anything like that. That night we all came to the altar and wept.”

Sohn’s entire pastoral staff went to Brownsville, a trip that sealed the direction First Assembly was now heading. The burgeoning Cedar Rapids revival spread by word of mouth. Soon pastors from other areas were showing up on Sunday mornings.

They asked if the church would be open to holding a weekday meeting.

Sohn and his staff started twice monthly Friday night services and offered a Friday pastors school and free dinner. Within months they were drawing people from six states and packing three overflow rooms and the lobby. The church became known as a place where the Holy Spirit changes lives.

Transformed Lives

Jim Cluney, pastor of an Assemblies of God church 60 miles away, says the revival at First Assembly has kept him in full-time ministry. "I come up here to get refreshed," he says. "It gives me hope that my church can touch our community. There have been times when we've brought our whole church to an evening service. There's an atmosphere of meeting God in His house."

The revival has also drawn scores of non-Christians who are now believers.

Bill Landis, 60, was a backslidden Catholic before he came to First Assembly at his daughter's insistence.

"I'd never been to this type of church," he says. "The music was loud, men were dancing in the aisles, and a man in the choir loft was skipping, of all things. But I got excited."

The third time he visited, Landis met the Lord. "I felt an exhilara

tion and deep sense of peace. Then I started trembling and weeping and felt the burden of guilt I'd been carrying my whole life lift, and I knew I was a child of God.

"My demeanor is completely different than it was before I was reborn," he says. "I hated myself. My family didn't want to be around me. Now I am full of love. I can say, in a spiritual way, that I love everyone in this church."

Mike Hoven, 54, is an iron worker and a pastor's son who had battled alcohol much of his life, sometimes staying in taverns for days at a time until his daughters brought him home. Hoven was on a crew that put a new roof on one of First Assembly's buildings when a pastor invited the workers to church. Months later, Hoven made good on the offer.

"My first thought was that the church was crazy," he says. "My second thought was, who was I to judge how people worship God? By the end, my daughter and I thought it was a neat place."

Still, he struggled with the idea that God could forgive him—until he went forward for prayer one morning.

"When the guy touched me I went down," he says. "I felt peace like I'd never known. Tears were running down my face. That was the

day I knew I was going to heaven."

Jim Miner, 38, struggled with homosexuality for years after

his father left the family.

“I wanted that affirmation, even someone to play ball with me,” he says. “I knew something was missing. There was a longing for my dad.”

Wherever his family moved, kids called him a nerd and a homosexual. After joining the Air Force, Miner enrolled in a Bible college in Minneapolis, but the taunts from his past continued to hurt, and he plunged into the homosexual lifestyle. While dating the woman he would eventually marry, he led a secret life of barhopping and promiscuity, which continued even after they went into full-time ministry.

The deception led to divorce, and Miner lived for years as an undercover homosexual—until God apprehended him one night in his apartment. Overcome with a realization of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, he sought out a program for recovering homosexuals and began attending First Assembly in Cedar Rapids. He was remarried in 1998 and started a traveling drama ministry based on the story of the prodigal son.

“Being here at the church, my heavenly Father has been incredible,” Miner says. “There have been times when I’ve been able to laugh with Him, cry with Him. He has taken me to that secret place. There is hope out there.”

Sohn says the revival has developed in three stages. First was exuberance. “We realized God was in the house,” Sohn says. “I couldn’t get people to leave.”

The second phase was repentance.

“Every time I gave an altar call, the whole church would come forward,” he says. “I responded to my own altar calls, the conviction of God was so strong. One evening a silence of God came over the church for at least half an hour.

“It was an awe of God. Finally a man walked up to the mike and confessed he hadn’t been a good husband. For two hours people confessed things.”

The third phase has been outreach. Sohn says that missions giving has skyrocketed; the

church gave \$321,000 to missions in 1999. And while it used to be rare for high school graduating seniors to go into full-time ministry, now he says it is “almost odd for them not to.” Twenty-eight young people have chosen to study for the ministry since 1996, youth pastor Kerry Brown said.

There have also been divine appointments. “One man went to a bowling alley, and God gave him a vision of the guy’s life in the next lane,” Sohn says. “The guy got saved. We have all these stories of people going places they wouldn’t normally go and witnessing to people.”

But even as the church was prospering it was also becoming a flash point for controversy. When the city newspaper gave them front-page coverage, some called the church a cult. Other pastors resented First Assembly’s newly enhanced profile, and Sohn realized that the church was becoming a hurdle to citywide revival.

“God spoke to me and said, ‘Are you willing to give away the harvest?’” Sohn says. So when First Assembly brought in the drama Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames, people from other

churches were invited to work the altars and direct new converts to other churches—a move that helped demonstrate that the congregation wanted to build God’s kingdom, not their own.

But what will keep the revival fire that has raged nonstop for four years burning? Sohn believes that prayer is one of the most important factors. And the emphasis on prayer and intercession is evident every Sunday morning.

In a fellowship hall-sized room on this typical Sunday morning, the intercession team is gearing up for services. The prayer meetings are open only to those who sincerely want to pursue intercession as a ministry and who have been interviewed by Rick Summerhays, the pastor who oversees the prayer and singles ministries.

A worship CD plays as a dozen or so people walk and pray in the empty room. Some stand facing the wall. The atmosphere is enriched with a sense of God’s presence.

“We are nothing but Your clay this morning, Lord. May that spirit of intercession, the things that are on the very heart of God, pour out in this room right now,” Summerhays prays.

He turns to the others.

“Friday night we had an unbelievable night—but Friday is not finished. There are some of you weeping already because you hear the roar of the Spirit. Lord, release the abandonment to You. Release the warriors unto You. Release the intercessors.”

More people arrive, and the prayer intensifies. Some of the

men are in labored breathing, as if physically struggling. A woman prays before two maps of Cedar Rapids on a corkboard, one of which is flagged with a hundred colored pins. A man leads worship with a guitar.

“Intercessors, get on the walls right now,” Summerhays says after a while. “Don’t be distracted by indifference this morning. Take your spot.”

The prayer time deepens. There is much movement, pacing, yelling, hand lifting, crying and groaning.

“Go ahead, pray in the Spirit. Don’t wait for noise to happen. You make it happen,” Summerhays says.

The intercession ministry is considered vital to what God is doing in the church; yet members of the team are careful not to see themselves as having an exalted position. They are not allowed to approach Sohn or other pastors with impressions they feel are from God, but must go through Summerhays or other prayer leaders.

The entire church is involved in prayer at some level. They have begun praying through the Cedar Rapids phone book name by name. And their passion for God is making an impact, not only in Iowa, but throughout the Midwest.

“I’ve had pastors call me and say, ‘How do you keep the Friday night crowds up?’” Sohn says. “All I can say is that I’m willing to do it as long as God wants.

“If He wants to lift the anointing off it, that’s fine. Church

has become fun. It's good to be in the presence of God."

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When God Came to Iowa

People like John Hicks and Michele Reynolds found healing and forgiveness when revival came to First Assembly of God in Cedar Rapids.

John Hicks felt the sting of his mother's rejection as a young boy when his mother abandoned the family. He was smoking marijuana and doing hard drugs by the time he turned 13.

"I was very lonely," he says. "There was nothing to look forward to."

He moved from his native Connecticut in search of a career and acceptance. He would drop everything just to be with any woman who showed interest in him. In Florida, he sold penny stocks for a brokerage firm until they were exposed for defrauding customers.

Hicks then went to jewelry school and began to work as a goldsmith. But his drug habit and party lifestyle followed him from state-to-state, until he finally found himself on a beach calling out to God for help. By the time he moved to Iowa to

take a new job, he was desperate, crying himself to sleep every night and wondering if anyone would even notice if he were to die.

But God heard his cry and used two situations to reach him. Hicks hit a deer on the freeway in an accident that could have killed him, and he met a backslidden Christian on the drug circuit who witnessed to him.

“I came to [First Assembly of God] on Easter Sunday 1996, reluctantly [with a friend],” he told *Charisma*. “I cried the whole way through. I watched Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane; then He said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ I wanted to follow Jesus. I realized it was Jesus I had been looking for my whole life.”

Hicks, now 34, gave his heart to Jesus and drove home knowing he had been saved. He kicked his 17-year marijuana habit that day, and instead of drinking that night he stayed up weeping and praying. Soon he met and married a woman from the church and joined the intercessory prayer team.

“My whole life is in this church,” he says. “It’s been four years. This is my family. Jesus saw the potential in me when nobody else did.”

Michele Reynolds, 48, was divorced and hurting when God led her into a new ministry.

“Since revival broke out, I’ve had a deep hunger to serve God,” Reynolds says. “What could I do? How could I be effective?”

Her daughter worked at a nursing home, but Reynolds never considered volunteering. "I told her that's something I could never do," she says. "I've always been in sales, busy, in the upper echelons."

But one day as she was praying for her daughter, Reynolds felt impressed to pray for the nursing home. The feeling was so strong that she decided to walk around the nursing home with anointing oil and dedicate it to God.

"I didn't know what I was really doing, but by the time I got around to the back of the building, praying for God to send people to help, I could hardly stand up, the power of God was on me so strong," she says. "I felt the sadness and abandonment of the people inside."

She started coming in to pray with, talk with and sing to the residents. Then she started her own business, which gave her more time to spend at different nursing homes. She has helped First Assembly start a ministry to nursing homes throughout the city.

"Before this, I wouldn't step into a nursing home," Reynolds says. "I was so busy living my life: '*Boo-hoo*, poor me; why am I divorced?'

"[Now] we are seeing miraculous things happen in these homes. We're seeing salvations. We have residents ask us to pray for them. They say, 'The Jesus girls are here.'"