

Here's an Inspiring Story of Grace and a Leader With Vision

I am always inspired by stories of vision—where a leader is able to go against the tide and believes God to build something in spite of trends.

That is the story of Phil Chamberlain, a pastor I met with last week while I was in Texas. His story in growing a nearly defunct United Methodist Church is all that and more. It is also a story of grace. In fact, that is the name of the church, Palestine Grace United Methodist Church.

But this isn't just a story of church growth. It's about the creative solution of how a bankrupt golf course became a blessing not only to the church but to the entire community.

The Cliffs Notes version of this story is that, through teaching on praise and worship and relying on the Holy Spirit, Pastor Phil has experienced 48 percent growth year in and year out for the past four years. [Click here](#) to see a short clip of him telling the story in his own words.

I have known Phil for several years. I heard about the growth of his church but had no idea of the details until I met with him on a business trip to Dallas. His story impressed me so much that I wanted to share it with you here in the hopes that it will inspire you. Even if you are not a pastor, you can believe God for great things in your life.

Ten years ago, Grace moved from its downtown location to an abandoned social security office. By the time Phil became the lead pastor four years ago, the church had dwindled to 35 people and was in danger of closing.

"We weren't on death's doorstep, but we were in death's front yard," Pastor Phil told me. "The people were desperate for vision."

Vision was something God had given him for the church. Moving to Texas from Colorado Springs, he had been employed by a megachurch and later helped plant a church.

"Those experiences were a seminal moment in my life. They taught me about vision, leadership and the grace of God like no other," he said.

✖ Growing a church in the Bible belt of East Texas, which already had 150 churches nearby, wouldn't be easy. But God opened the door to carve a niche that other churches weren't pursuing.

"People are hungry for the grace of God," Pastor Phil says, "They need a word from God and to know God is for them." Grace could understand that. The church had gone through a difficult 10 years prior with a scandal. Everybody in town knew about it. So God led the leadership team to a new tagline: 'The People of the Second Chance.' What better (witness) than a church that needed a second chance, becoming a place for people who needed a second chance with God."

The leadership began focusing on the grace of God found in Luke 15 in the story of the Prodigal Son. From that theme, they helped people understand the heart of God toward people.

In the process, they discovered that this biblical idea resonated with people.

"We all know we're sinners," Pastor Phil said. " Instead of beating people up, we focus on lifting them up to the grace of God. And it's the kindness of the Lord that leads them to repentance. They don't want to sin when they fall in love with the goodness of the Lord."

Pastor Phil punctuates his messages with his own failures, often with a lot of humor. "The result hasn't been a focus on the softness on sin, but on the greatness of God who can use messed-up people," he said.

Pastor Phil says he hates to waste peoples' time because they've been through "hell" all week long and they need a bit of "heaven" when they come in those doors. It needs to feel like home.

The atmosphere has been electric and is resonating with the community. A year into Pastor Phil's ministry, Grace's former building was too small to accommodate the crowds. "We used to joke that everyone was welcome except the fire marshall. But then, one Sunday, I got scared at how over-capacity we were," Pastor Phil says.

Looking to expand into a new location, Grace's leadership was frustrated by obstacles to building on land they owned. Then, an out-of-the-box idea came one day.

"One day, a lady tells me the former country club is for sale. I laugh because there is no way we can afford the huge price tag," Pastor Phil said.

But she insisted that the price had been cut by two-thirds. "So to humor her, I asked our realtor to check into it. The realtor called back and said, 'No, that's not the right price.' I knew it couldn't be that low. But the realtor interrupts and says, 'No, it's \$300,000 lower than that. The price dropped again this morning.'"

Within a few months, Grace bought the country club with a new building large enough to serve its congregation and 116 acres that included a golf course. The club had been closed down for four years and had been infested with wild hogs that destroyed the course.

The first question was, "What do we do with the course?" One

of the board members happened to be the superintendent for the local independent school district.

She and Pastor Phil were having a meeting where they both had an idea to share, and they both wanted to go first. As it turns out, it was the same idea that God had placed on their hearts: What if the Palestine ISD leased the golf course and ran it as a public course so that students can learn the basics of business management and other real-world knowledge for college credit? A month after buying the land, Grace leased the golf course to the school district.

“It’s a win for Grace, a win for the school and a win for the community,” Pastor Phil says. “They educate kids. The community benefits. And we have a mission field in our own backyard.”

Indeed, there is no other similar golf course partnership on record in the United States between a church and school—particularly a public school.

Coming onto the property at Grace for the first time, guests are greeted by creative signs like “God allows Mulligans” and “God is NOT mad at you.” This focus on grace has impressed the community where neighbors often stop members to tell them how much they appreciate what God is doing.

Pastor Phil recalls a lady flagging him down in the parking lot. “I thought she was going to complain about the traffic,” he said.

Instead, the lady broke down in tears sobbing because of family problems. She felt alone and condemned. But when she saw the sign, “God is NOT mad at you,” it touched her that God really does care about her.

She is now a server at Grace. People will drive on the parking lot and immediately feel at home because of the Spirit of the Lord. This is due to the prayer walking and 24/7 praise music

that has emanated from the building since they bought it. "The first thing we did after we turned the electric on is turn on praise music. We saturated the place with the sound of heaven," Pastor Phil said.

The vision for the property is large. They include plans to establish a prayer center, children's ministry center, youth center, a worship and discipleship school for ministers in training to go and plant other churches, and a planned residential development on part of the acreage.

After renovations were complete, Grace moved into their new facility in March, 2014, but they quickly ran out of room by September of the same year. Multiple services have eased the pressure of growth but the main service is still over capacity.

This month, Grace is breaking ground for a new worship center that will be open within the next year. "We're still believing God for that \$1 million" to build the new facility, Pastor Phil says. "He'll do it. He is faithful!"

"We're in the middle of a miracle here," says Pastor Phil, "God is doing this. I'm not smart enough to figure this out. East Texas is the place of stagnant churches. But God is breaking through with fresh wind and fresh fire here."

The mission field is large: 29,000 people in the county don't have a church. When does Grace stop growing? "When all 29,000 people find Jesus in a local church," Pastor Phil says. "The Father wants them home."

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