

Twenty Billy Grahams

Bianca Juarez Olthoff has a big dream.

“Everyone knows Billy Graham, but Billy Graham had a mentor and a discipler that made him who he was,” she says. “I’m not trying to be Billy Graham. I’m trying to grow 20 Billy Grahams.”

Olthoff—who founded and co-pastors The Father’s House OC in Orange Country, California, with her husband—has a heart for mentoring the next generation, particularly young women entering ministry. She says she never intended to start a church, and even revealed on the most recent episode of the Charisma News podcast that she hopes someone else will be leading the church in 10 years. She’s not interested in building one single church building as much as building God’s global church and equipping the next generation to lead it. In this Q&A, Olthoff shares her testimony, her dreams for the church and her heart for the next generation of leaders.

This interview—originally recorded for our New Year, New Voices podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here:

Berglund: Can you share your testimony?

Olthoff: I grew up in the church. My dad is a church planter and has served the local church currently for 30 years in East Los Angeles, California. I love the church. I love the call on my dad’s life. But I always said I would never work in a church, and I would never marry a pastor, and I would never church plant. So the best way to make God laugh is just to tell Him your plans.

My faith journey, growing up in a faith-filled house, was so fun. I got to see my parents express their faith and their

walk. But my dad always said, "One day, you will make a decision on whether or not my God is your God."

I never understood that because I was like, "Well, of course your God is my God."

Around the age of 22 or 23, I had come out of a devastating three-year relationship. My mom was diagnosed with two forms of cancer. One of them was brain cancer. And I'd lost my grandmother. It just felt like everything was up in flames in life. And in full candor and disclosure, I was really upset with God. We had loved God, we served God, we did all the right things; therefore, our life should be okay. I thought, My mom shouldn't be diagnosed with brain cancer, she should get a yacht and a 6-month vacation in Europe. Don't give cancer to my mom.

I had professed my faith at a young age, and I made a cognizant decision at 13 that God was my God. But I think at the age of 23, it was a pivot point of faith, where I realized that I have to put my faith through the fire and let the impurities and the dross rise to the surface so that only the purest thing remains. That's exactly what my mom's battle with cancer did. It was just a really crazy season. I had to come to a realization where, like, either I believe God is who He says He is and can do what He said He can do, or this is all for naught. That was my "come to Jesus" moment. That was when my faith became very real to me, and my faith became my own.

Since then, it's been this adventure of daily fighting to discover a little glimpse of God more and more each day. Even my faith journey of just walking in the fullness of His Spirit has been such an adventure that I don't take lightly. And it's an honor every single day to tell people and point people to Jesus.

Berglund: You mentioned that you never wanted to become a pastor—and here you are. So tell me about how you got that

call to ministry, and about your church today.

Olthoff: I think I'm a lot like a spiritual Gideon or a spiritual Jonah. I really want to be Paul. I want to be Deborah. But I think I'm the kid who just loves to have fun and run away from God's call. And I always come back, and God is so faithful, and He's so patient. He's so gracious. So I think in this season of my life, I'm running headfirst into the full gales of wind saying, "Okay, I'm just going to do it the first time that God asks me to do it."

But long story short, I was working for an anti-human trafficking organization called A21 under Christine Caine, and I had worked alongside her for 6 1/2 years. And I felt like this nudge and call to go into prison. It felt foreign. It felt weird. Why would I want to leave the covering of Nick and Christine? And it wasn't like a lead; it was like I felt this this holy hunch, this Holy Spirit nudge, that I had to go into prison. I had no idea what that looked like. But God used that as my stepping out and stepping into, because there was even a greater sense of freedom. I wanted to bring spiritual freedom to the incarcerated.

I realized, living in Orange County, California, that there are people who are not in physical prisons but are in spiritual oppression. My husband and I were just hosting Sunday night dinners at our house to whomever: my gym instructor, people he met at restaurants. We'd say, "Hey, do you need community? Come to our house."

The ambition was never to start a church. In fact, it was the farthest thing from my heart and mind. I just love cooking. We love hosting and entertaining. And we would have people come and sit around the dinner table, and we'd have some of the most life-changing conversations around the dinner table. I began to look at the life of Jesus, specifically in the book of Luke. Jesus was either coming to a party, going to a party or at a party in the entire book of Luke. And I realized,

“Wait a minute, throwing dinner parties is ministry.”

One night, as he crawled into bed, my husband said, “Hey, I think we’re starting a church.” And I said, “I think you’re crazy. We are not starting a church. We are starting dinner parties.” And slowly but surely, we started seeing God do some amazing things in the life of people just having honest, earnest, simple conversations around the dinner table. And slowly but surely, the Sunday night dinner crew just began to grow from 10 to 12 to 30 to 50. We realized we couldn’t meet in our house anymore.

I travel and teach at conferences and churches. I was up in Northern California, speaking at a women’s conference, and I stayed through the weekend to preach at this very big church up in Vacaville, California. I’d never heard of Vacaville. I’d never heard of this church. But I still connected with the senior pastor. And before I was set to preach for the first Sunday morning service—I’d preached the whole weekend to the women’s conference—the pastor gets in front of this huge congregation and says, “I want us to welcome Bianca Olthoff. She’s going to be preaching with us. She and her husband are church planters in Orange County, California.” And I remember sitting with my Bible and my notes and thinking, Hold up. Pump the brakes. This guy’s a heretic. I’m not a church planter.

I flew home that night, and I was laughing. I was talking to my husband about it. I said, laughing, “Can you believe it? He said we’re church planters.”

And as serious as a heart attack, he said, “Bianca, we are church planters, and we’re planting a church.”

And my response wasn’t elation. It wasn’t a holy praise party. You know what it was? I cried. I said, “I think you’re right. We are starting a church.” And that is how our church was birthed: through laughter, through crying and through a prophetic word. So it’s all the gamuts of a crazy Latina

woman. You laugh, you cry, you don't know what's going on, but you love to have a good party.

And those are still the values of the house. We laugh, we cry, we worship God, and we love to throw a good party. And God has been faithful.

We have had some of the most crazy, insane church planting stories, like discovering a homeless person living in our venue for four months. ... Some churches can say that they're a home for the homeless, but we literally are a home for the homeless. We rent a venue for our Sundays, but we can't control who's there on Saturday. And we've had magic shows, or some adult entertainment like the Thunder From Down Under. So we come in on those Sunday mornings, and we pray over the venue with anointing oil and bleach. We just take claim over our venue.

But we've had some amazing, life-transforming stories, and we feel privileged to join the ranks of other church planters, bringing the gospel to literally the least of these. So it's been fun.

Berglund: I'm sure you know that in many Christian circles, it's still somewhat controversial for a woman to be a pastor and to be a Bible preacher for men and women the way you are. Was that something you had to work through yourself when you felt the call to ministry?

Olthoff: I think that was part of the reason why I kind of wanted to run like Jonah. I love my upbringing. I loved being raised in the church, but I had more of a conservative background. So this concept of a woman leading was foreign, and a woman pastor was even more foreign. Dare I say, I would say that I was taught that it was wrong.

For my entire life, I felt like maybe there was something wrong with me. That I was in the wrong for doing what I felt God had called me to—and not just called, but equipped and

gifted me to do. So there is and has been opposition, coming from as close as family to as far as the internet. I had to reconcile this.

I began to read a lot. I wanted to make an educated decision. And really what it boils down to, and what it distilled down to, is one day I'm going to have to come face to face with God. And He's going to ask me what I did with His Son. I feel privileged to have taught children and teenagers and women, but I've been invited to bring the gospel not just to my state, not just to the nation, but to the globe. And one day when I come face to face with God, and He asks me what I did with His Son, I want to unashamedly, unabashedly say, "I preached Him to anyone who would listen, no matter the age, the stage, the gender, the socioeconomic status."

I just want to boldly proclaim who Jesus is. And for those who feel like it's wrong, hey, that's no problem. Don't listen. But for those who have ears to hear and a heart that knows, let the gospel go forward.

Berglund: I know one thing that's been really important to you in your ministry has been mentoring other women in the faith. Can you talk a little about that?

Olthoff: Absolutely. I believe it was Andy Stanley, the pastor out of Alpharetta, Georgia, who said, "Do for the one what you wish you could do for all."

I remember being a 25-year old female in church—having these leadership, preaching, teaching and evangelistic gifts, being passionate about developing people—but there was no one to develop me. And in a culture, in a church, in a time where it was wrong, I just had to figure it out for myself and stumble my way through.

So at 35, I look back on when I was 25. And I wish someone would have pulled me aside and said, "Hey, you have a lot of potential. You've got a lot of gifts. But let's steward that

and let's groom you and develop you in a way that you can walk in maximum potential." Now I wish I had that. And I thought, Well, why can't I be that for someone else?

Here's the thing: I believe you can learn from anyone. You can be mentored by anyone. But for me specifically, I do feel called for women, because one, I am a woman, and two, I know the intricacies, the minutiae and the nuances of leading as a woman. So I pulled in about 15 young, great women of God who feel like they are called either to the secular or sacred spaces or want to develop in their leadership, and I made the investment. I made the financial investment, and I met with them every single week, twice a week, for three months. And that started this passion for mentoring. Now, that program has since ended.

Now that we have the church, my husband and I are just passionate about grooming the next generation. Our goal is to hand off the church in 10 years. The vision is big: 10 churches in 10 years reaching over 10,000 people, and we want to not build it for us. We want to build it for the next generation, and the next generation needs to be called, equipped and trained and prepared to inherit what we're going to pass off. So we are passionate.

Personally, my legacy goal is to develop 20 world-caliber preaching, teaching, evangelistic men and women who radically shift and change the world. Everyone knows Billy Graham, but Billy Graham had a mentor and a discipler that made him who he was. I'm not trying to be Billy Graham. I'm trying to grow 20 Billy Grahams.

Berglund: So when you're planting these churches, you're not thinking "I'm going to pastor this for as long as I'm in ministry."

Olthoff: No!

Berglund: You want to plant it, pass it off to someone else

and then go plant another church or go train someone else then?

Olthoff: You know what? My husband's of German descent. He was born here. His parents were born here. His grandparents were born here. But his heart for Germany and his heart for Europe has been contagious.

This is before we started the church. We were doing a lot of stuff in Europe. I got invited to speak at some women's conferences. He got invited to come and consult for some smaller churches. And then it grew to larger churches and networks out there and churches out there.

I have two stepkids, and so our call first and foremost is to our family. We're committed to our kids. So when we tossed around the idea of coming alongside some churches in Europe, it just wasn't the time, because the kids were young. So then the Lord began to shift in my husband's heart and in my heart, so we are planted here stateside.

But our goal eventually is to be like Paul and Barnabas. We just want to go equip the saints. We want to go help churches build. We want to be fundraisers for churches that are in low-income areas and urban areas stateside as well as globally. (We haven't been public with this, so you're getting all the tea. I'm just spilling it, to be honest.) The goal is in 10 years. And of course, we'd have a transition plan and equip the saints to take over the church. But who knows what the Lord has for us? We could end up in Europe. We could end up in Canada. We could end up in Latin America.

We're passionate about God's people coming alive and equipping people who are weary in their season. Keep on reminding them, "Don't grow weary in doing good, for in due season you will see a harvest."

In God's greatness, we are seeing harvest right now. But this harvest isn't for us. This harvest is for the next generation.

Berglund: How are you seeing the Holy Spirit at work in that next generation?

Olthoff: Listen, brother, all my Baptical roots are going to come out right now. I spoke about my “come to Jesus” moment when I was 23. Again, I grew up in a very conservative environment. And I think theoretically I knew about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God and the power that He possesses. Like, I got the theology of it. I didn’t have the practice of it. But when my mom was diagnosed with cancer, you can’t talk about faith without having a full understanding of it. We can’t talk about the miraculous without believing in it. We can’t talk about the supernatural indwelling, the power that we possess, that rose Jesus Christ from the grave like Paul reiterated to the Ephesians and to the Romans.

I feel that for a long time I saw so many half-baked Christians walking around with an unvictorious life, without having an understanding of the power that we possess and the indwelling of the Spirit. That is what I’m passionate about. I’m depositing into the next generation.

Listen, we started the church with zero dollars, zero people and zero venue. And God has been so gracious that we’re celebrating over 350,000 YouTube download views for the messages coming out of the house, over 500 salvations and giving away \$80,000 to people in the community domestically and internationally. That is not Matt and I. Who are we?

Listen, I’m the daughter of an immigrant. I couldn’t read, write or spell at the age of 12. I grew up morbidly obese. My husband lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Like, we are not cool people. We don’t wear skinny jeans, and we’re not like the hippest and the coolest. We are passionate about Jesus, and we’re passionate about developing other Jesus lovers. And God has found favor on that.

Yes, we are strategic. Yes, we are organized. Yes, we have a

marketing background. Yes, we care about communication. But we are so utterly dependent and compliant to the very presence and need for the power of God and the indwelling of His Spirit that we choose not to go forward.

Honestly, I believe the movement that brought my parents to know Jesus—the hippie movement, the Way, the Jesus movement back in the '60s—is a microcosm of what God's going to do in this next generation. I think it was an amuse-bouche. It was a bite. It was a tidbit of what we're going to see. And I want this next generation to know that that revival will not happen unless you're utterly dependent on God's presence moving before us.

Find Bianca Juarez Olthoff on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.