

Verified by God

Pastor Michael Todd leads one of the fastest-growing churches in the country, but the vast majority of his audience isn't coming to the church building. Todd, the 33-year old Pentecostal lead pastor of Transformation Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, says in any given week, his church gets roughly 5,000 people in the building—and more than 35,000 online. When fewer than 1 in 8 of your churchgoers actually go to your church, what does that mean for pastors? Long before coronavirus ever forced churches to shift services online, Todd believes the digital age changed what it means to be a pastor.

“The first thing you have to know is the internet has changed everything,” Todd says. “And [in some ways], the last thing it has touched is the church—because we want to keep our traditions. I really do believe the Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples, but I don't think we could have done that in health until now, with the internet. There's no way I could be a good father and a good husband and all this other stuff, and now also go into the world and make disciples. Even if you're [focusing] only on your house and your neighborhood, that's still a huge undertaking. But I believe God's given us the internet ... for great good.”

But Todd says he has no illusions that his church's success can be attributed to savvy marketing, great technological design or his own inspired preaching. In fact, he says his entire testimony served as a test of obedience: Was he willing to obey God even when it didn't make sense or match his own life plans?

Todd chose to obey—and God blessed his ministry beyond his wildest expectations. He spoke to Charisma about his testimony, why the next generation has latched onto his approach to preaching the gospel and how pastoral

responsibilities are shifting in the internet age.

Promotion and Favor

Todd never wanted to be a pastor. In fact, as a teenager, he wasn't even sure he wanted to be a Christian. Though he grew up in a Christian home, he says he never had an authentic relationship with God until his late teenage years. Before then, he says he was primarily raised and disciplined by BET and MTV. The church didn't have answers for the problems he and his peers were going through.

"I messed up so much because I didn't have an example," Todd says. "The only rule we were given was, 'Don't have sex before you get married.' Well, what happens when you've done that? What happens when the locker room introduced you to pornography? ... The church has been so silent about that. In recent years, they've started talking about it, but even then, the church is so PG when our middle school locker rooms are R-rated and X-rated. ... So what ends up happening is we're trying to spend the rest of our lives undoing what was presented first."

That feeling of being failed by the church as a teenager is part of why Todd says he's so passionate about helping teenagers and young adults today. He says he wishes he'd had a relatable, young mentor like himself when he was struggling with his faith.

Instead, Todd says what drew him back into relationship with the Lord was his love of music. He had played drums since childhood, and the church worship team became his primary musical outlet. During high school, he began pursuing music full time and, after graduating, started his own production company and became a music producer. During that season, he flew around the country to events and studios to produce music for clients.

One of those gigs took him to Greenwood Christian Center (GCC)

in his hometown of Tulsa in 2008. He knew the pastor there, who asked him to run sound for a conference. After he did a good job, the pastor asked him to keep running sound at the church. Later, the pastor noticed his musical talent and transitioned him to becoming the worship leader.

At this time, Todd was splitting his time between GCC and serving at his parents' small church plant in the same city, called Spirit and Truth Praise and Worship Center. His involvement at his parents' church began after his mother called him on the phone and informed him, "God told me you're supposed to do something with the youth of this church." Todd tried to politely refuse—even suggesting that maybe she had misheard God, who meant to use one of her other sons. After all, Todd had never preached or taught from the Bible. But his mom would not be swayed. The next week, Todd became the youth pastor of his parents' church. There were only seven youth present: three of his brothers, three godbrothers and godsisters, and one other person. (The church itself had only 15 members.) Todd called the ministry "S0 FLY," an acronym for "Sold Out Free Life Youth."

"I had never prepared a message or done anything like that," Todd says. "But God told me four things before I walked in there. He said, 'Be real. Tell on yourself. Don't judge them. And love them first.' And that was my instructional guide into ministry."

Six months later, Todd says S0 FLY had 150 young adults attending weekly. S0 FLY had no flashy sound system or game systems. The youth group was 150 young people "literally in a room in a circle," Todd says.

Today, he recognizes it was a spiritual phenomenon, but at the time, he says he didn't take it that seriously. He didn't even study or prepare message notes; he just showed up every week planning to share what was going on in his life, talk about the Bible and try to relate to the kids. He says he focused on

the four tenets God taught him before his first night of S0 FLY. That meant confessing his own sins to the group at times—including pornography addiction and emotional manipulation—and sharing how Jesus personally transformed him every day. He believes that raw, uncomfortable honesty is the real reason young people responded to him.

“I think people are drawn to authenticity,” Todd says. “We have a saying around here: ‘It’s not about perfection; it’s about progression.’ So that gives people license to mess up and be like, ‘It’s my bad. I messed up, but I’m going to get better.’ And I think hearing that from somebody who holds the office of a pastor—when most pastors [project perfection]—is just refreshing to people. ... How many pastors or small group leaders actually confess what they’ve done—not in an ethereal story or in an ‘I know a guy’ story? That’s how the Bible tells us we overcome. Yes, it’s by the blood of the Lamb—that’s what God did and what Jesus did on the cross—but then by the words of our testimony. And I think that’s what’s missing today.”

Todd says he continued to lead S0 FLY for another year, until about 250 young people were coming every week in 2010. During that time, Todd started to compare the work he was doing at GCC with the work he was doing at his parents’ church. He believed Bishop Gary McIntosh, GCC’s founding pastor, needed more pastoral help, while he thought his evangelistic, charismatic parents could use some structure—and then he realized the two churches should team up and become one. Though there was initial resistance, over the course of three months, both sides became open to it, and eventually Todd’s parents’ church merged into GCC. And when it did, S0 FLY grew even bigger.

“It got up to about 900 young people in summer 2011,” he says. “We still had no real leadership team—it was just me, my new wife [Natalie] and my godsister. Then I preached a message on purity and cut the thing in half, to about 400 or 500 young

people. For about three years, that's where I learned. I had no budget. We had to raise a leadership team of 12. We did internships. I had to teach the young people how to give because we had no budget, and the church had just gone through a hard financial season."

Todd served faithfully in the youth ministry, but his fruitfulness did not evade McIntosh's eye. He met with Todd in 2013 and told him he wanted Todd to help him bring the SO FLY culture to the Sunday morning crowd. At 25, Todd was named the executive pastor of the church, and McIntosh mentored Todd in leadership, bringing him to all the board and financial meetings, letting him program services and design sermon series. Then McIntosh had a heart attack that sidelined him completely for eight months—and Todd was the only one at the church who knew how to do McIntosh's job.

"For eight months, I preached four different sermons to different groups of people every week," Todd says. "On Sunday morning, I was preaching to a mostly traditional Pentecostal church. On Sunday night, I was preaching to a bunch of youth who were just trying to explore God and see if they wanted to be saved. On Wednesday night, I was preaching to the people who wanted to go deep in God—so you had to bring some outlandish revelation. And then on Saturday, I was teaching at a leadership internship. I did it for eight months, and it about killed me."

When the pastor returned, he started to take back some of his usual workload, and they split the sermon load 50/50. But soon Todd felt a sense of stagnation. He started to grow concerned that GCC lacked a vision for the future and wondered if God was calling him away from ministry and back into music producing. After all, he'd never intended to be a pastor long term. He went to meet with McIntosh and told him his season had come to an end. McIntosh disagreed.

"I don't have the vision for the next season," McIntosh told

him. "I believe you do."

Todd disagreed: "I literally told him verbatim, 'I don't think I could be a pastor to a church. I don't even like people that much.'"

"I've seen you do it," McIntosh said. "I've watched it over the past two years. You raised up a leadership team of 12 people who committed three years of their life to this and never got a dime. You taught the hardest demographic in church—which is young people—to give, and by the end of your time [at SO FLY], the youth were giving \$9,000 to \$10,000 a month. We were able to hire a youth coordinator off of what they were giving."

As McIntosh chronicled all of Todd's achievements, Todd realized God had been training and equipping him for years to serve as Transformation Church's next pastor. He was still hesitant, but when McIntosh told him it would be a five-year leadership transition, Todd agreed. He thought, That will give me time to go to seminary or college and to learn some more stuff.

Shortly after that, in September 2014, McIntosh announced to the congregation that Todd would assume the lead pastor position in one year. Todd was flabbergasted. But that didn't actually happen. Instead, Todd became the lead pastor on Feb. 1, 2015. It wasn't the transition he'd imagined or planned. But Todd says God was in it.

"All I can tell you is that there was a supernatural grace that came over my life," Todd says. "God put me in rooms and in relationships with the right people who could give me what I needed when I needed it. We've just been faithful in stewarding Transformation Church. When I took over, we started in a converted grocery store with 350 people and a very small budget. Since then, God has expanded our influence to be able to help a lot of people see transformation in Christ. So we're

just grateful, and we're super humbled."

Obedience and Rewards

But the turning point for Transformation Church didn't happen until more than two years later, during which time God was preparing Todd—and also testing his willingness to obey. Todd says he was happy to just survive 2015, his first year as lead pastor. During that year, he says he felt led by God to start an \$80,000 capital campaign to buy new cameras—a controversial decision that ended with some people leaving the church. Todd was sorry to see them go but still felt strongly that God had told him to do this. The church began recording every sermon and putting it on YouTube—but no one watched them, with single-digit views on many uploads.

The next year, Transformation Church was blessed with growth.

"In 2016, God told us to go beyond, and our church grew 400 people, and our budget grew \$400,000," Todd says. "As a 27-year-old church planter, I felt like we were on top of the world. So I was ready to keep going."

In October 2017, Todd received a surprise call from Elevation Church Pastor Steven Furtick. Todd had adapted one of Furtick's sermons and used it at his church, and when Furtick went searching for video of his own message, he found Todd's instead.

"He watched it and sent me a minute and 41 second voicemail," Todd remembers. "He said, 'I don't know who you are. But I just want to let you know you're called. You're anointed.' And I'm, like, dying. I'm thinking, What is going on? What is real life right now?"

But in December 2017, Todd faced a real test. He felt the Holy Spirit telling him, It's time for you to stride. Todd looked up the term "stride," which means to walk in long, decisive steps in an intentional direction. After discussing it with

his oversight pastor, Tim Ross, they agreed that God was telling Todd to slow down his pace.

“Jesus fulfilled every messianic prophecy ever spoken about Him, and he did it in three years,” Todd says. “Yet you never hear about him running to his next appointment. He walked everywhere. ‘And they walked to Samaria.’ ‘And they walked to Judea.’ If I only had three years, I would have at least had a horse or a donkey or something to help me get there faster. But Jesus found the pace of grace. So I really embraced that, like, What does that mean? It means less is more. You do what you’re supposed to do instead of doing everything. Our culture tells us to grind, hustle, network and do all these other things. But honestly, you can’t beat the pace of grace.”

As a result of this word, Todd felt convicted to cancel several church events—including all of the upcoming Christmas festivities. He remembers gathering the staff Dec. 6 to announce he was “canceling Christmas.”

“You know, for a church, Christmas and Easter are like the Super Bowl,” Todd says. “We want pyrotechnics, tattoos that say ‘I love Jesus’ and the whole nine yards. You know what I’m saying? ... But you don’t have to understand to obey. I got up that next day in my staff meeting and I told them, ‘Hey guys, I feel like God’s telling us to slow down, to find the pace of His grace, to stride, and we’re going to cancel Christmas.’ Everybody was like, ‘Really?’ I said, ‘Yeah, we’re just going to do regular service, and none of the plays or anything else.’”

In hindsight, Todd believes he passed a spiritual test of obedience in that moment: “It was almost as if God was like, I just needed to make sure that I had your heart and you will obey because I want you to know that what I’m about to do has nothing to do with your ability. It has everything to do with your obedience.”

A couple of weeks later, a girl posted a two-minute sermon clip of Todd on Twitter. The girl did not go to Transformation Church, and Todd has no idea how she found out about him. The clip itself was from a sermon series that was four months old, titled Relationship Goals, posted on the church's YouTube channel. Within 48 hours, the video had been watched 2 million times.

Overnight, hundreds of thousands of young people began asking who this young pastor was and where they could hear more sermons from him. They found the YouTube channel and began binging years' worth of recorded sermons. The videos—which had languished at low hits for years—were suddenly viewed tens of thousands of times.

Todd hadn't done a thing, and in fact, says he did not even realize what was happening for several days.

"I remember sitting there with my wife at P.F. Chang's for dinner on a date night," Todd says. "And I told her, 'Babe, I remember having 4,000 Instagram followers, and it just went to 14,000 in one day. I think Instagram is broken.' ... I got 10,000 new followers every day for a week. It was stupid. And I had no idea what had happened yet."

That month, Todd went from 4,000 Instagram followers to nearly 100,000; the church's YouTube page grew from 1,800 subscribers to 120,000.

"People ask us all the time, 'Who did y'all hire? Who were your marketing directors?'" Todd says. "The people who were consuming the content were cutting those videos themselves and editing them and putting them on Facebook and YouTube. We didn't have the team, staff or the foresight to do any of that. So that's how you know it was really a God thing."

After Todd's viral moment, Furtick called him again and invited him to preach the weekend after Easter at Elevation Church. A few months later, a video of that sermon went viral

too. That opened even more doors, including preaching at conferences.

Despite the growing platform, Todd says he's striving to keep his eyes on what matters most. Twitter puts a blue checkmark next to celebrity accounts that have been "verified" as authentic (in order to prevent fraudulent accounts). Despite hundreds of thousands of followers, Todd is not verified—and he's OK with that.

"I'm unverified, which is kind of like a cool thing for me," Todd says. "Like, I don't even have to be verified, because we were verified by God. We're just trying to be faithful to the lane God's put us in to represent Him to the lost and found for transformation in Christ."

Future Church

Because of Todd's rapid ascent to lead pastor at Transformation, he never attended Bible college. He believes it gives him a slightly different perspective than other pastors.

"I try to study and to show myself approved, but my filter is 'How are people going to get it?', not 'Is this hermeneutically correct?'" Todd says. "I don't have a professor in my mind that I'm thinking of. The only person I'm trying to get a 'well done' from is God. ... I rely on the Holy Spirit to lead me and guide me into all truth, and He has. He's kept me, He's corrected me when I've been wrong, and He's sent people to correct me. But because my heart is pure, I think He continues to allow me to be used in that way."

That said, no matter where pastoral training took place, Todd believes all pastors are learning on the fly what it means to lead in the internet era.

When asked how preaching would change in the future, Todd laughed: "It's already changed."

"We have about 5,000 people who come to our physical location every week, and the numbers keep growing every week," Todd says. "But this past week was like 36,000 unique devices online—and some people are gathered with their whole family watching a single device. So it's more people than that. But they're tuning in live with us on Sunday morning from different time zones—Africa, Paris, Florida—and watching live with us. And after we post it, about 200,000 people watch the message in one week."

Todd says in some ways, the job of a pastor is the same as it's always been—and in other ways, it's shifting.

"For me, I have to shepherd the sheep that come to this physical location," Todd says. "I also have a global, apostolic call—that's what I'm going to call it—to encourage people, help them grow and point them back to the Word of God. But I do not grow my internet church to the level that it impacts my physical location."

Besides, he jokes, "I could not manage a 40,000-member church. That doesn't even sound interesting to me." In fact, he thinks if his goal were to have a church as big as Lakewood or Gateway Church, Transformation Church would probably be far less successful—because God has provided the exact resources they need to handle a church their size. Still, Todd says he tells his staff that if the church is ever truly persecuted in America, and they take away the building or their tax-exempt status, their church will be just fine: "I could preach in a room with one camera, and we could still get the message out to 30,000 people."

You can read the rest of the article in the print magazine of *Charisma*.

He hears stories of many house churches that stream Transformation Church's services and use them to supplement small-group discussions. He's very encouraged by this

development, saying it reminds him of both the early church and Netflix all at once.

“It takes me back to Acts 2:42, where people gathered in homes, shared what they had, read the apostles’ teachings and talked about it,” Todd says. “Well, that’s what they’re doing on social media. They’re sharing about it. Friends are finding out about it. ... We’re not facilitating it or doing anything. It’s like the concept of Netflix. The reason Netflix blows up is because they provide content, but you decide how you want to watch it and how you want to use it. And as we’ve done that, we’ve seen salvations skyrocket. We’ve seen people get baptized. We’ve seen people go from being drug addicts or in different lifestyles or shacking up to being convicted or getting married.”

Todd says, in an ideal world, everyone would attend a local church and be heavily involved in service. But for people who are distant from or skeptical about God, sometimes one online service a week is all they will accept—and the Holy Spirit can reach them through that.

“We want to be a long ramp for some people,” Todd says. “In church, we want people to get saved today, get baptized tomorrow, speak in tongues the next day and be on the service team by next weekend. ... But what if it takes somebody three years because of all the damage and the hurt and frustration? Well, they won’t come to church, but they’ll listen to my messages while they’re working out.

“The Bible tells us faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God. As they’re hearing that Word of God, slowly the Holy Spirit is drawing them near. It may take them six months, a year, two years, three years. But we [could be] the bridge to get them plugged into a local church where they live. They may watch us during the week, but now they’re going somewhere where people know their name.”

Transformation Church has been particularly effective at reaching a diverse cross-section of young Millennials and Generation Z, a group often described by demographers as disinterested in religion. Todd disputes that point; he says what they are really disinterested in are frauds.

“They’re leaving the church because the church, in many respects, is a big business and a facade,” Todd says. “That’s why they’re leaving. This is the most authentic, self-aware generation that we’ve had in a long time, and they can smell a fake from a mile away. I think that’s why I’m appealing to this generation: Because they see it’s real. It’s authentic. If churches and leaders would value authenticity more, their Millennial and Gen Z attendance would go up tremendously.”

Put simply, if young adults are going to do something, they want to be 100% all-in, without any reservations. They don’t want to play church politics, pretend to be someone else or compartmentalize Christianity to Sunday meetings. They want to be free to be fully who God created them to be and hold nothing back in pursuit of Jesus. Because of that, Todd believes they can represent a threat to some “old guard” Christian leaders, but that they can also change the world for God.

“Nobody can tell me Millennials are not interested in God,” Todd says. “They’re not interested in a big business with no power. They can’t do that. ... These young people? If they’re committed to something, they’re getting a tattoo of it, they’re changing their license plates to ‘SOLD OUT,’ they’re telling all their friends. And so it’s a bigger decision because they can’t do anything halfway.”

Todd says the beautiful thing about Transformation Church is that it’s as diverse as the kingdom of God. Whether young or old, digital or in-person, black or white, the movement is united around loving and obeying Jesus. And Todd says it’s his honor to serve as their pastor.

“Because we made intentional efforts to be multigenerational in our church, you can see a grandmother, mother and grandchild worshiping and praising on the same row, giving God glory, and then going back and talking about the message over lunch,” Todd says. “... Everybody’s the same. They’re just older. The things people dealt with 20 years ago, we’re still dealing with today—it just may have another name on it. Everybody at the core has the same issues and problems: insecurity, comparison, ‘Do I have a call?’, ‘Do I have a purpose?’ And we know the answer to all of them is Jesus.”

READ MORE: To watch the original sermon that made Todd go viral, visit .

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