

Lead People to

FOLLOW Jesus



One pastor's
turbulent
journey to grace
and beyond



Geologists say that constant and significant pressure can turn rubbish into something precious. Given enough time, such conditions produce oil, coal, and even diamonds. This also happens to be the process for forming the character needed to lead a church.

Since 1980 David Johnson has served as pastor of Church of the Open Door in Maple Grove, Minnesota. During his tenure, the church has experienced both growth and decline, and in recent years has shifted its emphasis, as Dave puts it, "to produce 'formed people,' not formulas for more nickels and noses."

Leadership sat with Dave to ask how, below the surface, he is being formed into that paradoxical combination: follower of Jesus and leader of people.

When you started as a pastor, what was your passion and calling?

My dad was a fundamentalist pastor, but he was the kind of guy you'd actually like. Yet growing up in a fairly legalistic church world, where the outward appearance was emphasized sometimes to the neglect of the spirit, my view of God was pretty stern. Grace may have saved me, but Christian living wasn't particularly fun. Only as an older teen did I begin to taste and see that God is good, that grace was for more than getting to heaven someday.

My first pastorate was in Melrose Park, near Chicago. For my four years there, the call I felt was something I identified in Matthew 10: Jesus gives power and authority to the disciples and sends them out, but tells them to go first to the lost sheep of Israel and tell them the kingdom is near.

I translated that into my ministry this way: *Don't worry about the world yet. Don't go evangelizing the whole city of Chicago yet. There are a lot of people who've grown up in church hearing the gospel, and it doesn't sound to them like good news. Start by bringing the good news to them.*

That was what drove me. That was the juice. Forgiveness, acceptance, authenticity. And I brought that joyous grace to Open Door when I moved there. The most common testimony I heard in the early days was, "I feel born again again."

Was there a defining moment when the ministry of grace really became good news?

I'd long had this dream: *Wouldn't it be something if I*

could be in a church where the kind of people Jesus ministered to, like prostitutes and publicans, were actually coming because of amazing grace?

What I saw in the church was mostly the kind of people Jesus was always fighting: Pharisees who cared about things that didn't matter.

One night I was at church ministering to this guy who was telling me stuff he'd never told anybody, ever. He was so ashamed of his addiction and sin and was so broken by it that he was sobbing. That night he experienced all sorts of healing. Yes, he had a long road ahead, but there was grace for this man, and he believed it.

I walked out of the room thinking, *This is the kingdom!*

But as I left the room, I bumped into a lady from the church who was weeping, too. But she was weeping because of a decision the church had made to change the choir robes. She was so devastated and angry that she unloaded on me.

It was as if God said to me, "Pick one, Dave. Which kind of person are you going to focus on?"

I realized both needed grace, but I felt called to the broken and not the uptight.

Was there a moment when you realized that Church of the Open Door shared your heart for "prostitutes and publicans"?

I remember the day when a great big guy with long, stringy, greasy hair walked down the aisle. He wore a t-shirt that said something about stamping out virginity in his lifetime. And he was coming down the aisle sobbing, wanting to meet Jesus. A few years before, not only would this guy not be coming forward, he would not have gotten inside the door of our church.

What did it take from you as leader for the church to become an Open Door that welcomed such people?

In the first five years, the battle was with elders who weren't on the same page with me. We had the typical elder board structure where elders have all sorts of authority but no responsibility. In other words, they weren't actually doing any ministry. Their contact with needy and broken people was nil.

When we started doing real ministry and messy lives were being touched and elders were resisting, I remember doing something I don't recommend for anyone else. I asked a couple of the elders, "If you guys came to Open Door next week for the first time,

and you saw who's coming and what we're doing, would you come again?" They answered no.

So I said, "How can you say you don't like what the Spirit of God is doing in our church, but you want to be an elder? This can't continue. And if our church wants you as an elder, they can have you, but they can't have me as pastor."

They wound up leaving.

When the church then started growing, what was that like for you?

We had a season where, this may sound weird, it felt like everything we touched worked. I remember feeling like the only thing limiting the size of the church was how big our room was. I was humbled and overwhelmed. It was exhilarating and exhausting.

But it had a dark side.

Yes, about twelve years in, I was empty.

I was ready to quit if I didn't collapse first. I remember getting a plaque from some organization for being one of the ten fastest growing churches in the city. But inside we were a mess.

My personal life was a mess, because at the time I didn't believe you could lead a large church and have a quality personal life. I thought the two were mutually exclusive. Our key staff people were stressed and exhausted.

A couple of us took the plaque into the woods, put it on a tree, and shot it full of holes with a rifle. We hated what it stood for. We felt like this bigness was killing us.

This led to you, as you've described it, "hitting the wall."

Every incompetency that we thought we could ignore because we'd been growing came and bit us. Really hard.

For one thing, I don't have an administrative bone in my body. So organizationally we were a mess. We could present a wonderful experience of authenticity and grace on Sunday morning, but programmatically we couldn't live up to it. I was in charge of this thing, but it was chaos. I hated church.

Then three big and very bad things happened.

First, we lost a youth minister in a very bad way. Members of the youth group rebelled and (remember, we're a "grace" church) they didn't like the way he was presenting grace. They claimed he "just didn't get it." He was no legalist, but he encountered fallout from the recovery movement and people who got their identity from being victims. They claimed he wasn't

exhibiting grace in the right way. They made our grace environment its own form of legalism. Eventually this youth minister couldn't take it anymore and he left. My incompetency as a manager was exposed. This really affected us all.

Second, one of our key leaders on staff left after an adulterous affair, which really rocked us.

Third, we failed publicly in an attempt to purchase some land. That doesn't sound so bad, but it was humiliating because it showed how stupid we were. How stupid I was. We made commitments but then had to back out.

I'll never forget standing in front of the people and saying, "We've been talking about this land, and we were doing our best to hear God, but we made some terrible decisions, and we're going to have to pull the plug on this thing."

That was one of the darkest days in my life.

What did all this do to your soul?

Two things emerged deep inside: anger and fear.

I remember going on vacation, and it was the only time I slowed down enough to think about what my life was actually like, and I realized that I hated my life.

And a fear came over me. The thought of climbing those steps into the pulpit one more time seemed overwhelming. I just could not do it anymore. I told the elders that I was going to have to do something to survive, even if it meant leaving.

Fortunately the elders told me not to resign but to take a three-month sabbatical. That allowed me to get away without leaving.

Did the sabbatical restore you?

Not at all. Those three months were horrible. We still joke about it as "Dave's sabbatical from hell."

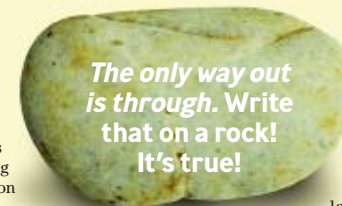
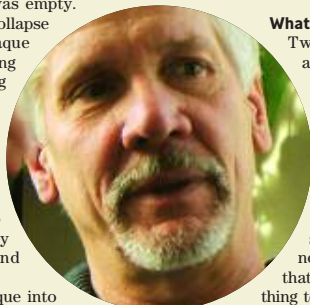
First off, the very thought of taking a sabbatical ran counter to every instinct I had. I was a go, go, go person. I had no idea how to slow down, how to catch my breath. So I didn't have peace about it.

Then the whole thing was one catastrophe after another. My wife and I joined a coed softball team, and the first week Bonnie, who's a good athlete, dislocated her knee and broke her ankle. She was in agony. We had to cancel a vacation to Florida and wait two weeks for her to go into pre-op.

Then when they did the pre-op, they found a lump on her throat and thought it was cancer. It was awful.

A week or so after that, on a beautiful summer day, a storm suddenly came up, and our house got hit by lightning and caught fire.

So we had lost our house, my wife can't walk,



she's just had throat surgery, we're in borrowed housing, and then she gets sick, and she's vomiting through her surgical incision into a sink.

I'm thinking, *Where are you, God?* Anger just showed up everywhere. No, the sabbatical wasn't doing a thing for me.

What was the turning point?

I was fighting with God. I was so mad. I put on some headphones intending to play some screaming rock 'n' roll that would match my anger. So I'm sitting there, dialing the radio, and I accidentally came on some worship song. And it just melted me.

I sat there weeping, just thinking, *Crap. Crap. Crap. I can't get away from this, because Jesus is the sweetest name I know. Even when I'm pissed, he's still the sweetest name.*

What happened at the end of the three months?

When I came back, I was not healed. I was not better. But I did a talk that people still ask for today called "Writing on a Rock." It's from Job 19, where Job is in a pit after arguing with his friends who had all the reasons why he was suffering.

Finally he asks for help, and I imagine him emotionally giving up in the confusion of trying to grasp what is really going on. Then he asks for something with which to write on a rock. A piece of paper wouldn't do. He wanted a rock. And this is what he wanted inscribed on a rock: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand."

What kind of things do you write on a rock? And I came back with a message on things I needed to write on a rock, including, *The way out is through.* That is, there are no magic wands. The only way out of pain is through it. Write that on a rock! It's true!

How did you lead the church amid that pain?

I told the people that if you are in the middle of the ocean on a cruise ship and you get hit with three torpedoes, as our church had, you're not worried about where you're going anymore.

You're worried about whether you're going to sink. Your job is to stay afloat. We had been hit by some big torpedoes, and I told them we needed to spend some time patching these holes.

I said these things publicly in sermons. But behind the scenes I let the leaders know that I needed to find out if we had a future together. Imagine a pastor saying to his elders, "If I hate it here in a year as much as I hate it now, I won't be here. But let's give it a year." But that's what I did.

We all covenanted together that we would stay committed for a year.

Obviously you made it past that year. What helped you survive and re-engage?

The realization that the problems in the church stemmed in large part from the fact that the church shared my DNA. Just like if your kids drive you crazy, you have to admit that some of that is in their DNA, which came from you.

The message from God was like, "Dave, you can leave if you want. No curse. I know you love me, and I will love you, and it's okay to go. But maybe you should stick around and be part of helping this place grow up. To do that, you also have to grow up."

I sensed God saying, "This church needs a father, and you need to be willing to wear that mantle. You need to grow up and step into the role of a father."

How did that new role show up in your leadership?

I had this arrogant attitude that if something was organized, it wasn't spiritual. I needed to grow up.

Now I still don't believe that just by being slick enough with your methodology that it obligates the Spirit to act. But while organization doesn't make a church grow, lack of it can kill an authentic work of the Spirit. And that had been our experience.

So we called Keith Meyer as executive pastor to help us with administrative stuff, and I had to trust him. That has helped us greatly.

I also had to go much deeper in my own personal life. I went to counseling, which helped me see my narcissism and how much I was doing "for God" that was really for me. Much of this was painful.

The biblical story that comes to mind is when the people cross the Jordan into the Promised Land and there's land to take (Joshua 5). The people are saying, "Let's go!" But first God says, "Wait. Get circumcised first. Circumcise all the sons of Israel."

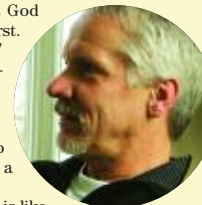
This is very indelicate. Circumcision hurts. It slows you down. You won't be fighting many battles for a while. At Open Door it meant we weren't going to be the fastest growing church for a while, if ever.

That circumcision of the heart is like cutting around your pride, cutting around your productivity. And if you're not willing to let God go to some of those painful places because you think you've got to keep things going, you'll never get there.

What happened in the church as you went deeper personally?

Well, it was a real Gideon thing, a reduction of the force.

At first, I thought we'd do a three-month rest and



then ramp it up again. But in conversations with Keith, we asked, "Would we be willing to do church in a whole different way? What if we weren't adding more services and we weren't looking for a bigger room? Would we be okay with a smaller crowd if we could bring them deeper?"

We did that, and the crowd did begin to diminish. The numbers dropped. But the giving went up. It was weird because all of a sudden I noticed, *We have fewer people, but the people who are here are more invested. I think that's a good thing.* But I had to be okay with the trajectory, which wasn't easy.

Who has influenced you with your new approach?

We have been profoundly affected by Dallas Willard. Especially big is the idea that we had reduced the gospel down so that one little slice of pie was seen as the whole pie.

What was that small slice?

That the gospel is basically about getting people to believe that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins, and if you put confidence in that fact, you'll go to heaven when you die.

Yes, the gospel includes that, but it's so much bigger than that. My understanding of the gospel now is inviting people into life in the kingdom of God, following Jesus, following the Rabbi.

The only way you can enter into this kingdom life right here and right now is by trusting and following this great Rabbi who will teach you and empower you to live a different kind of life. It results in heaven when you die, but the point is not to worry so much about heaven. How about being fully alive, right here, right now? That's the message that's compelling.

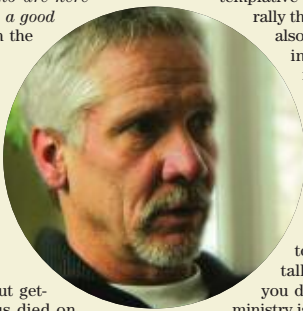
What's been the response to shifting from "getting saved for heaven" to "following Jesus now"?

It makes religious people nervous. I think we have a spiritual equivalent of comfort food, and if a pastor says certain words, *born again* or *get saved*, a few times, people think he's okay. If you don't use those words, people start wondering about you.

We're not having mass exodus. I mean, I'll get an e-mail here and there; a few people leave. It bothers me, but not enough to water down what Jesus said.

What personal practices help keep your soul strong enough to continue in ministry?

After fighting it a long time, I finally agree with Willard that the most important spiritual discipline for pastors who talk about God a lot is solitude and silence: learn-



ing be quiet and create space for God.

This is all really strange for me because I always had a view that silence and contemplation were for people who were naturally like that. And I'm not wired that way. I'm A.D.D. But when I began to understand it, I developed an entirely different view. I need to be quiet long enough that I can listen to the noise in my own soul and then bring it to God.

So it's precisely people like me who need the contemplative practices more than people naturally that way. And I guess the opposite is also true: people who are always lighting candles and sitting in silence, maybe they need to get off their butts and do something.

If you were with a 27-year-old who just took a church of 160 (which was you a few years ago), what would you say to that young pastor?

"Are you sure?" Honestly, I'd want to ask, "Are you sure?" And I'm not talking just about a mystical call. If you don't have the gifting for it, church ministry is a hellacious thing.

At the same time, I wouldn't try to help him avoid my mistakes. I would say, "Let 'er buck. Because if you have the anointing, if you have the juice, something's going to happen as you preach and as you share your heart. Some will resist. Others are going to be drawn to you, and you just have to invest in those guys. You'll have some work to do, and it won't happen fast."

Why not avoid the mistakes?

To try and avoid the mistakes is like trying to avoid death. The way I see it, the whole point of the gospel is that we are supposed to die. That doesn't mean I like it. I don't like to die, but Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains by itself alone, but if it dies it comes to life."

The message of the gospel is that the only way you come to life is that you've got to die. You die first, and then you come to life. Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me into this kind of life."

Our response to the cross and the resurrection isn't to sit on the sidelines and cheer that Jesus died and rose to life. No, no, no. He died to show us how. It's not just that he died so that you wouldn't have to. He died to show you the pattern. The message of the cross is, "Don't cheer for me; join me. Come into this kind of life where you let go of control and let go of your demands. Every time you do it, you'll think you're going to die. But you don't die; you come to life."

I know when I hit the wall, I died. But in so many ways, that experience resulted in things coming to life, for me and for Open Door. 🙏