

FOREWORDS BY TERRY SMITH & BILL HYBELS

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN THE GLOBAL CITY



MAC PIER



Chapter 24

A PREFERRED FUTURE: THE LIFE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth."

REVELATION 21:1

Terry Smith began speaking as an itinerant evangelist at age 16 in his home state of Indiana. Blessed with an unusual speaking gift, he crisscrossed the nation, speaking in 40 states by the time he was 29. Terry was speaking 250 times a year. He traveled to El Salvador, Ireland, England, Germany, Canada, Columbia, Israel, and Africa to speak on the topic of leadership.

Terry primarily addressed youth and revival meetings in his early career. He also spoke at various crusades on high school and college campuses under the banner of Take New Territories. Even at the beginning of his speaking career, Terry had a dream in his late teens that he would one day pastor a church in suburban New York City. Terry eventually came and spoke to a fledgling group of five or six people that included his friend of 20 years, who had planted

a church in an upstairs apartment in Orange, New Jersey. Terry became well known as he also preached in larger venues during his 20s.

Every year, he came to metropolitan New York to speak to the little group in Orange, New Jersey. By 1991, the group had 54 voting members, but no building, money, and no leadership structure. When they called Terry to come as their senior pastor, he accepted.

Today the church has 900 active participants with a weekly attendance of more than 500. The Life Christian Church has become one of the most multiethnic churches in the region. The church also has some of the greatest socioeconomic diversity in the region. What happened?

The Journey of the Life Christian Church: A Timeline

Year	Accomplishment
1983	The original church was formed as New Life Church.
1991	Terry and Sharon Smith moved to West Orange, New Jersey, with their three children to begin the pastorate. The church began forming LIFE (Life in a Family Environment) Groups and moved into a school.
1993	The church rented space from a community house.
1995	The church bought a bowling alley in downtown West Orange and converted it into a worship center. They renamed themselves as the Life Christian Church.
1998	The church adopted a coffee bar model in the lobby of the worship center to become more welcoming to unchurched people.
1999	The church purchased the Ridgeway Campus—a 6.25-acre campus which was the site of a monastery. It was intended to be the future church site, and is now housing the offices of the church.
2002	Pastor Smith begins negotiating with the town of West Orange and developer Larry Pantirer for the exchange of the Ridgeway Campus with undeveloped Metzger farm on Northfield Avenue.
2004	Town of West Orange approves Northfield deal for the Life Christian Church.
2006	Northfield lot officially becomes 747 Northfield Avenue and is dedicated during the From Dirt to Destiny event.
2007	Groundbreaking occurs at 747 Northfield Avenue for new modular offices.
Spring 2008	Dedication of the new modular office complex.

The Texture of the Life Christian Church

The church has grown steadily 10 to 15 percent each year. Pastor Smith described the growth as not the spectacular, overnight type of growth, but the result of doing the little things to be a healthy church on a daily basis. The church is approximately 35 percent African American, 35 percent Anglo, 20 percent Latino, and 10 percent Asian or other; there are a number of internationals from Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The church's diversity is also seen not only in its ethnic makeup, but also in the *types* of people who have been attracted. A number of Ivy League graduates attend the church, particularly those from minority backgrounds. People come from both the wealthy communities such as Sparta, New Jersey, as well as from the inner-city communities of the surrounding townships.

East Orange is predominantly African American and Newark also has a large African American population. West Orange was settled by Irish and Italian Catholics, and is largely upper middle class. It is 30 percent Jewish also and is now a diverse community. The church draws from all of these communities, as well as from as far away as Manhattan and Brooklyn.

For many attendees, their experience at the Life Christian Church is the first time in their lives they have met others so remarkably different from themselves. In the context of the Life Christian Church, something extraordinary happens—people learn to love people who are radically different from themselves socioeconomically and culturally.

Carl George, noted author on church growth, made the observation that the one factor that all of these attendees have in common is that they are upwardly mobile. The church has created a leadership culture that helps people at whatever starting point they find themselves, and encourages and enables them to progress in all areas of their lives.

The mission of the Life Christian Church is “to inspire people to grow in their life with God and to learn, live, and lead as authentic followers of Jesus Christ.” The vision of the church is:

- to be a church for the unchurched and spiritual seekers to explore the claims of Jesus Christ and find life's meaning through relationship with God and others;
- to encourage spiritual growth, through development of our relationship with God and others, and to encourage the pursuit of authenticity and excellence in each area of our lives;
- to be a church for people of all backgrounds, and to model reconciliation in every way, especially in relationships, and between races, cultures, and denominations;

- to facilitate ministry opportunities for every person joined to the local church;
- to be a church of leaders and a leading church.¹

The Church's Strategic Programmatic Decisions

At the beginning of Terry and Sharon Smith's journey with the church in 1991, they decided to invest everything into small groups, great weekend experiences, and children's ministries. Their commitment was to provide a great weekend experience with culturally relevant worship, pregnant with the presence of God. The Smiths were equally committed to providing spectacular experiences for children and young people.

The church has always invested in the creative arts through music and drama. The intentional commitment to ethnic diversity is an important thread running through the church's life. At first they had been told they would not be able to grow a large church with so much diversity, but God has honored their deep unwavering conviction to this.

Today, 30 LIFE Groups meet three times per month. The groups are spread out in diverse geographic areas representing the members' addresses. These small groups provide the intimate setting for community, so desperately needed in the hurried, time-poor culture of the urban Northeast. In addition, the entire membership meets monthly for an evening of celebration and Communion service.

Having spoken several times at the church for the past ten years, I am always profoundly encouraged by this remarkable gathering of people. Terry and Sharon Smith have an unusual ability to attract and engage people from every walk of life, demonstrating an exceptional leadership skill that brings people together from diverse backgrounds.

The Influence of the Life Christian Church

Pastor Smith has always been very deliberate about engaging the broader community. The church has taken Christmas offerings and invested them in community projects with the Eagle Rock Civic Association. The civic association exists to provide practical service to the area.

To aid in health care in the community, the church purchased a defibrillator for the local volunteer first-aid squad. Pastor Smith is called upon for major civic functions, including

the public relations commissions for the town of West Orange that grew out of the major crisis of corruption in government in the community.²

Pastor Smith participated in the inauguration of the mayor and received the first call from the mayor after 9/11. Pastor Smith interacts with Newark's current mayor, Cory Booker, and also interacted with former New Jersey governor, Richard Codey. This is what Governor Codey and Mayor Booker said about the church's impact at a banquet honoring the 15th anniversary of the church:

Governor Codey: "I first heard of the reverend from my father who said that this young man was going to do a lot of great things for West Orange, and he was right. A lot of you obviously are not from town, but it's more than a town, it's a region. And what he and his wife and family bring to this town and to this region is why we celebrate this church."³

Mayor Booker: "I'm here today because this church is not about four walls and just taking care of the congregation itself, but about bringing in the community and reaching out with love to be a conduit for the light and glory of God's love."⁴

Engagement in Mission

Besides its ability to connect with people of political influence, the church has a deep commitment to people in desperate need. The church has developed a partnership and financially supportive relationship with St. Bridget's house in Newark, a community where 1 out of every 63 African American men have AIDS. This has an impact on hundreds in the community.

Charles Valentine has emerged within the church to lead the PATH ministry (Peace over Addiction Through Healing). God enabled him to overcome a 20-year drug addiction and has a powerful testimony of how God can rescue the down-and-out. The outreach is a 12-step recovery program from a Christian paradigm and reaches out to people in jails and hospitals. It has been extraordinary to see the number of people with addictions, who are from all walks of life, who come forward for help. Since its inception, the PATH ministry has served hundreds of people.

Globally, the church has begun to partner in Rwanda with World Vision. After a 2007 vision trip, the church hosted Nathan Gasatura, a World Vision leader, who is also the national AIDS chairman for Rwanda. The Life Christian Church is now sponsoring more than 100 children as part of the Hope Church Alliance, the partnership between World Vision and Concerts of Prayer Greater New York. Dozens of leaders from the church have planned travel to Rwanda to visit sponsored children.

Another important partner is Touch the World. The church has sent more than 40 young people on summer missions trips to Uganda and Mexico with Touch the World. The Life Christian Church has been an excellent partner with other churches and agencies, drawing from regional expertise to strengthen its own outreach.

Pastor Smith was an early architect for the partnership with the Leadership Summit hosted by the Willow Creek Association (WCA). He and I made our first trip to WCA meetings in Florida in 2004. We thought carefully on how to bring the resources of the summit to our region in a different model. The ten sites that have emerged in the metropolitan area represent the greatest ethnic diversity of any city participating in the summit in North America.

A Preferred Future: The Church Looks Ahead

Pastor Smith has plans to build a facility—50,000 square feet in an initial phase. By phase two, it will expand to 111,000 square feet. The objective in the building program is to build an 1,100-seat auditorium. The church also plans to become a center for missions for years to come, with the new facility to include an arts center, leadership center, child-care center, recreation center, and bookstore.

As the new facilities emerge, they will be the first of their type for an English-speaking congregation in the West Orange community. It will represent a remarkable achievement for an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse congregation, pointing to a miracle-working God.

Pastor Smith believes, teaches, and practices the truth that God has a unique destiny for each of us from the promise of Ephesians 2:8–10. He says, “Our responsibility is to listen to God and then do our part in fulfilling the dream that God has for us individually and corporately as the body of Christ.”

One of Pastor Smith's great strengths is his intentionality. I still remember the day when I got a phone call from Terry more than a decade ago. I was sitting in my attic office at home. Never having met, he knew enough about the work of Concerts of Prayer and its mission to seek out a meeting. He committed financial support for the organization over the phone—that was a first! Pastor Smith has become a very important part of the organizational culture of Concerts of Prayer, as well as a member of the board for the New York City Leadership Center. He articulates very clearly the possibilities of what God can do in our region through a community of like-minded leaders and churches.

Leadership Reflection Questions

1. Looking at your personal leadership journey, can you identify two or three experiences from your past that have prepared you for your present responsibilities?
2. Describe what a “preferred future” would look like for your church or organization in terms of its size and outreach.
3. Share your dream for your congregation or organization with another leader on your team. Note the similarities in your respective visions.