

Chapter 16

New Life Book Store, 1975-76

In 1972 Bill and Ruth Ann moved to Crystal Lake, Illinois, a small town known as a bedroom community some fifty miles northwest of Chicago, where Bill had a job with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). They had become active members of Woodstock Bible Church in Woodstock, just nine miles north of Crystal Lake. When they looked for a Christian bookstore they found that in an area where more than 100,000 people lived there was not one such store. They began thinking of starting a bookstore as a means of taking the message of God's Word to a large segment of McHenry and surrounding counties. They surveyed the whole area carefully and became convinced that the need was real. They started to pray that God would assemble a team that would organize a first class store and in April 1974, while we visited in their home, they asked if we would be willing to help them start that Christian bookstore. We promised to give this some serious thought and agreed to ask the Lord for His leading.

Meanwhile, down in St. Joseph, Missouri, I began to feel some physical problems associated with the aging process. At times I felt my heart beating irregularly and when I went to the doctor for a physical examination, he found a tumor in my prostate gland. He kept an eye on it for a year or two, during which time it seemed to become more serious, though quite slowly. I began to think that as I approached 60 years of age, perhaps I should consider a change.

Bernadine and I thought and prayed about this for a full year and in early May of 1975 we made the decision to move. At that time I had a small workshop and quite a collection of tools that I realized I could not keep if we were to move to an apartment in Crystal Lake, so after discussing the situation with the Church Board, we conducted a back yard sale early in June. We sent out 218 farewell letters and started packing.

Saturday evening, June 28, the church gave us a lovely farewell dinner, complete with farewell speeches and a cash gift. We shed our tears and were reminded of the Apostle Paul's farewell from the Ephesian church, as recorded in Acts 20. The next day, June 29, Bernadine's 54th birthday, we held our last services at Maranatha Bible Church. I enjoyed the morning service immensely and looked forward to the evening meeting when I would give my farewell message. Just as I stood up to speak, Dan Ustinovich butted in and said, "Too late! You have already given your last message. You will have to sit down with your wife while we members of Maranatha will do the talking!" We had noticed some visitors that evening, and when we were told to sit down, I saw another group of fifteen or twenty coming in at the back of the sanctuary.

Obediently we sat down to enjoy an excellent slide presentation entitled, "A Trip Down Memory Lane," depicting our years in St. Joseph. They completely surprised us and did a beautiful job, using a set of slides to review the progress of the work from the days of the dance hall, the services in the parsonage basement, meetings in the union hall, and the progress at the present site of Maranatha Bible Church. We were thrilled beyond words as we remembered that just a few years ago these folks, in Martha Marriott's words, "didn't even know how to set a table." I had not realized until then that as they had grown in their knowledge of God, they had they had grown remarkably in their social skills.

The next day we loaded a U-Haul truck and trailer, and drove to Davenport, Iowa, and the next morning to Crystal Lake. We had signed a lease for an apartment in a building known as Coventry Club Apartments. Ruth Ann and Bill with the Thornton boys, Mike and Gregg, helped us unload, taking our freezer and refrigerator to the bookstore, and the rest of our possessions into the second floor apartment.

We spent the next week or two planning and working at the New Life Christian Book Store. They had found an attractive building not far from their home, with enough space for a good-sized store. Soon I found myself wondering if I had stepped out of the Lord's will in leaving the pastorate to go into the bookstore. The more I thought and prayed about it, the more I believed that God was indeed leading, even though I might not understand every detail.

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At that time Bill served on the Council of Woodstock Bible Church, and one day he informed me that the church was considering asking me to serve as their interim pastor. I found it a relief to think God might still have a place for me to serve Him as a shepherd and I wondered what might lie ahead. The experiences at McClure, Hillsdale, and St. Joseph were all completely different from each other and in my mind I wondered what our Lord had for us in the future.

Although one or two had come to the Lord through the work of the Bible Baptist Church in McClure, Illinois, and although I had learned important lessons there, I could not help feeling I had accomplished little or nothing as a pastor.

At Hillsdale my confidence was boosted considerably, but I had to face the fact that even before I went there, the church was running smoothly. While I enjoyed excellent relationships with the Hillsdale people, and couldn't help being pleased with the progress in their building plans, I knew very well that I had been privileged to work with highly talented men and women who had already learned the art of pulling together, people who knew and loved the Lord.

Saint Joseph was entirely different. When we went there we found a group of people who were merely "*playing church*." The best thing that could have happened was exactly what did happen: the play-church died. That brought us into an intimate relationship with two families, the Deweys and Marriotts, and just a little later the Heintz family joined us. As we looked back we

could not but be thrilled at the miracle the Lord worked there. Going from the abandoned dance-hall, via the parsonage basement and the Union Hall, God through these three families established Maranatha Bible Church.

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Now the question that bothered me was, “What does God have for us now?” The answer to that would have to wait; right now we worked towards preparing to open the New Life Book Store. The next major step after securing the building was obtaining the books, music and other merchandise. Bill arranged for all four of us to fly to Anaheim, California, to attend the annual convention of the Christian Booksellers’ Association. Bill had long ago decided that if he opened a bookstore, he would go first class, and carry a full line of books. He planned to spend \$25,000.00 on the start-up process.

Arriving in Anaheim, we found no less than three thousand people attending the Convention. Simply find our bearings in such a huge place proved to be a real challenge! Each evening as we reviewed what we had bought, Bill would say, “We have to spend more!” In five days we spent \$13,523.35 in forty-six stalls, and felt that should be a good start for our store. We found the experience invaluable as it provided a quickie education in bookstore operation. We arrived home on Friday and the next morning started work on repairs in the store building. That afternoon the Feaster family arrived. Timmy Feaster and Wes Daughaday stayed with Bernadine and me for the next three nights. We enjoyed getting to know these grandsons better.

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Then on Sunday afternoon, July 27, 1975, the Woodstock Bible Church’s pulpit committee graciously invited me to be their interim pastor. Serving as “interim” would permit me to spend some time building shelves and helping to prepare the store for coming activities.

The Lord brought us to Woodstock Bible Church at a particularly exciting time; that Wednesday night, the congregation voted unanimously to borrow \$100,000.00 to erect a new church building. The next Sunday, August 10, they met for the last time in the “Old Building” and then moved into the High School’s auditorium for the next months. Two weeks later, on August 24, the leaders of the church broke ground for the new building. It was in this exciting time that I was privileged to serve as the interim pastor.

Meanwhile we kept busy at the bookstore and on September 2 we happily observed the “Opening Day.” For months we made little progress. Although we knew with our heads that progress would be slow for the first few months, we found it a bit discouraging to go week after week without selling enough books and other supplies to meet expenses.

At the end of November the Woodstock Bible Church Board voted unanimously to recommend me to the church body as the “full-time pastor.” Two weeks later, after the conclusion of the Sunday morning worship service and the Communion Service, the Board called for a congregational vote. They voted 31 votes in favor and 6 votes against inviting me to become the “full-time pastor.” We considered rejecting the invitation since there were 6 negative votes, but in view of the fact that the Board had been unanimous in their recommendation, we cautiously accepted. At the same time I found myself enjoying opportunities for counseling at the bookstore. The church, which had been paying me \$300.00 per month, promised a salary of \$800 per month.

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At the end of January, 1976, I found myself in St. Joseph’s Hospital in Elgin for prostate cancer surgery. Friends and acquaintances all over the country let me know they were praying for me. I shall never forget the night after the surgery. Dr. Bobelis had told me a day or two

earlier, “Paul, you have a bad cancer. I wish I had seen you years ago.” I lay in bed that night, wondering what they had found. Perhaps they had decided to sew me up to let me die. In spite of the uncertainty, I became deeply conscious of the presence of the Lord. No, there was no supernatural glow in the room, but His presence all through that long night kept me rejoicing and praising Him for the experience. For years I had told others that in the midst of sickness they could have peace, and even joy. Now I had the privilege of experiencing it myself.

The first two Sundays back at the church, which was still meeting in the High School auditorium, I was overwhelmed with the kindness and consideration of our friends. The first Sunday in March I started preaching again, and enjoyed presenting the Word of God.

The leadership of the church consisted of a group of three or four Elders, and a larger group of Deacons. The Elders met once a month, as did the Deacons. Then once a month the Elders and Deacons, together comprising the Church Board met for the “Council Meeting,” where major decisions were made concerning activities in the church. As I recall, the Elders made most of the decisions concerning the regular business of the church. Everything ran smoothly in the first three months of 1976. Then on Saturday, April 17, I took some bills to our Treasurer, Bob, who was also an Elder in the church. I had been present at the Council Meeting on the previous Wednesday, and at that time sensed no problems. But when I presented the bills to Bob, he informed me that “The Council decided” to postpone any action on my salary.

This came as a bombshell, since I knew that our fixed expenses amounted to considerably more than the \$300.00 per month I had been receiving as an interim pastor, and I knew that the Council had approved my \$800.00 salary. Somehow, the Elders who had been so kind and gracious when they recommended me as the full time pastor, now seemed to be having second thoughts.

Meanwhile the Lord opened various doors of service, and I found myself serving as a Chaplain in the local hospital, and souls were beginning to come to Christ. I began to visit quite a list of folks who were beginning to show interest in the message of salvation. People came to me for counseling.

Suddenly in the evening of May 28 an arsonist attacked the beauty shop next to the New Life Book Store shortly after we left for the night. We were called back and had to stand watching the firemen battle the flames, and observing the thick black smoke pouring out of the bookstore. The flames did enormous damage to the beauty shop, and the fire fighters managed to keep the fire from spreading to the other stores, but the smoke caused a hundred percent damage to our stock, which at that time amounted to about \$30,000.00 and we had to replace every bit of it. Thinking back to that night we recall that we felt no panic; we knew that our Lord was in complete control. In fact the Crystal Lake Herald in its edition dated Wednesday, June 2, 1976, called attention to the sign in the window of the New Life Book Store which stated, "We are still rejoicing in Christ!"

The kindness and graciousness of the publishers and dealers went far beyond anything we could have expected. Every one of them was generous in helping us get going again. Further, it seemed the Lord used that fire to get the attention of folks all round the county, and business picked up dramatically as the new stock came in.

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While attending the IFCA National Convention in York, Pennsylvania, the last of June, we received word that Roger DeBoer, a teacher at the high school, and member of Woodstock Bible Church, suffered a broken back in a bad fall. While trimming a tree from a tall ladder, a falling limb smashed the ladder, throwing him to the ground. Everyone loved Roger and his wife

Ginny. On the way home from the Convention Bernadine and I stopped at the hospital in downtown Chicago. Totally paralyzed, Roger lay on a special “sandwich bed” that kept him slowly rolling in such a way that for a while he would be facing up, then gradually he would roll till he faced the floor. “Pastor, isn’t this a tremendous passage?” He read II Corinthians 4:17, “For our light affliction which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Tears dimmed my eyes as Ginny turned the pages for him and he rejoiced in knowing this was the Lord’s will for him at that moment.

Almost a year later, on May 9, 1977, Roger suffered a stroke and was taken in a coma to the hospital in Woodstock. Ginny stayed with him till late that night. The next morning I went to the hospital early and found that Roger’s condition had deteriorated during the night. I called Ginny and she arrived about 7:45. Within ten minutes Roger died, and Ginny at once said, “Praise the Lord! He can walk again!” What a tremendous testimony those two servants of the Lord gave in that community!”

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Going back to when we returned from the IFCA Convention in July 1976: we found the new church building a hive of activity as people planted shrubs on the outside, and painted on the inside, and on August 8 we held the first service there, even though there remained considerable work to be done. On a Sunday evening two weeks later, Bernadine had her Junior Choir sing “It’s Cool in the Furnace!” The next day marked the opening of Vacation Bible School with 110 children. Things were really humming!

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Starting in September I served on the Credentials Committee of the IFCA in Westchester, Illinois. I gasped at the very first name that came to my attention, Raymond Ness. I knew Raymond's family from Tadmor days, when they lived in a pitiful little shack with dirt floors, just across the creek from the old one-room schoolhouse he attended with Margie and Ruth Ann. I never knew he had come to the Lord, but here he was applying for membership as a pastor with the Independent Fundamental Churches of America! What an encouragement!

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That Sunday we celebrated the first baptismal service in the new church. Eleven folks in the church went through baptism that Sunday. This proved to be a perfect way to start the Dedication Week. On Tuesday I went downtown to Moody Bible Institute to have a radio interview on WMBI. Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights Bryan Jones came and spoke on the "Priestly Ministry of our Lord."

Then came the Dedication Sunday, September 26, 1976, with the theme, "To The Glory Of God." Despite gentle rain all day long, we had a tremendous turnout. Bob Murfin who presented a popular radio program daily from Moody Bible Institute, and was related to one of the church families, brought the dedication message at 2:30 PM. Bob is an excellent storyteller and he knows how to present the truth effectively to his audience. The ladies of the church handled the noon meal superbly as well as refreshments in the afternoon. In the evening a musical ensemble from the Evangelical Free Church of Crystal Lake presented "The Good Life."

When the day was over I felt like shouting "Hallelujah!" I could think of nothing that could have made the day any better.

Someone expressed surprise that the pastor did not take any part in the dedication service, but in view of the fact that I had served as pastor for such a short time, I brushed aside that

comment, recognizing that the Elders and Deacons had performed magnificently during the long months that led up to this big day. Instead of feeling slighted, I could look back and thank the Lord for the past year and more. The New Life Book Store was now a reality and growing. I had been afraid that I might never have the opportunity again of preaching the Word of God, but instead, the Lord had opened the door for me to be the pastor of a fine church, a church that met in a brand new building. My daughter and son-in-law were active in the church, and we were in the process of developing excellent friendships. Truly I could say with the psalmist, “The lines are fallen to me in pleasant pastures!” I looked forward to God’s blessing here at Woodstock just as He had blessed so generously in Hillsdale and St. Joseph.

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