

THE PATH TO THE WELL  
by Dick S. Pickens

In my last year at the Austin Presbyterian Theological seminary, one particular class assignment sent me rummaging for a term paper subject. About 9 one night I was feeling the pressure to choose a topic and get started, but no topic had yet crossed my mind. I rummaged through the many books I had accumulated through the seminary years. Nothing – not a single idea! Finally I climbed up on a stool and looked through some dusty paperbacks on the top shelf in our living room. What is this? – THE CROSS AND THE SWITCHBLADE? Dave Wilkerson? Who is he? Suddenly I remembered when this book was handed to me a year or so ago by a young man at a Full Gospel Businessmen’s Fellowship meeting where I had spoken. While the cover had looked interesting, the pressures of seminary and a fulltime job left me little time for casual reading. So I had placed it high on my bookshelf and had forgotten about it. I had no idea what the title meant, so I flipped through the pages to see if it might contain an idea. I did not put it down until I had finished it early the next morning. I cannot recall whether it affected my term paper, but it definitely affected the next years of my life... and of quite a few others.

Over the past two years our regular Sunday night Charismatic prayer meetings had grown in attendance at the home of seminary professor Dr. J. Rodman Williams and very precious wife Jo. Talented musicians had sprung up in our very midst and contemporary songs of praise had become a central part of our worship. Soon our young psalmists became known as “God’s Children”. With their anointing they soon found themselves making appearances at churches, retirement homes, as well as at other locations and events.

On one of those Sunday nights, an Assembly of God preacher attended. Bro. Royce Nimmons had heard of these denominational folks who had Pentecostal leanings, so he came and told our group that he was starting a Teen Challenge ministry in Austin. I was intrigued with the idea since Teen Challenge was what sprang from the Dave Wilkerson ministry on the streets of New York City. We maintained occasional contact as Royce started a downtown coffeehouse near the bus station, a regular hangout for “street people” and guys who were bussed up on weekends from the Camp Gary Job Corps in San Marcos.

One day Royce called and asked if I could have lunch with him. As we visited he told me he wanted to start a radio program about Teen Challenge. In fact he had already signed to buy time on KLBJ-AM on Sunday mornings. I told him I would think and pray about it. Later I offered to produce a program for him but told him that it needed to be different from most Sunday radio programs by preachers. I told him I would record a demo for him. But I would need to show up and participate at Teen Challenge enough to get a feel for the ministry.

After one night in that little coffeehouse I saw the possibilities. It was the age of druggies and runaways and the place was teeming with lost kids. My flair for the dramatic led me to do a Hollywood type production on a hometown budget. So the next week I brought a portable tape recorder on Saturday night and started interviewing kids – both lost ones and saved ones. I had so many voice clips that

my head began swimming with script ideas. I put together a dramatic documentary monologue around the voice clips showing the searching that was prevalent among the youth of that era. It took about 8-10 hours to produce the 15 minute program using the low-tech of that day (reel-to-reel tape and splicing tape). I produced the program for months until Royce's contract ran out. By now Nancy and I were very involved in the coffeehouse and were invited to be on the Board of Directors. The radio programs were turned into an audio-visual slide show, which we showed in churches.

The University of Texas area was becoming a hotspot for drugs and what they called "crash-pads" where dozens of homeless men and women (including teens) would hang out and sleep off their dope (even distribute some there). I felt a burden for a new work aimed at the UT area. To my surprise, I learned that Royce did also. He and I would often close the downtown coffeehouse near midnight and then go "walk The Drag", as we referred to it. Sometimes we were invited into the basements and flop-houses where the drug scene was in full evidence. It was very interesting, but I had only glimpses of where this experience was really leading.

Royce received a call to Teen Challenge in Denver and I was named as interim TC director. I could not be official since I was not an Assembly of God minister. In fact I was not yet ordained at all.

It was obvious that the downtown coffeehouse was about to close. Several of us had that strong sense of call to the UT area, but how and where? So we gathered folks together for brainstorming and 'prayerstorming' sessions. First we gathered at the old coffeehouse location; then we began having weekly lunch meeting at the well known Holiday House restaurant on "The Drag". I remember the day Nancy Edwards, a UT student, came in and excitedly told us there was a building for lease a couple of blocks away. She just "knew" that God would get it for us. So we walked over and gasped at the beautiful 50 year old three story building, a former fraternity house. Nancy Pickens pointed out that in the Old Testament every 50 years all property would return to its rightful owner. We wrote down the phone number on the For Lease sign. I prayed; then I made the call.

The rich owner agreed to meet me, but he didn't sound at all encouraging when I told him why we were interested in his building. He had more financially grandiose ideas. My heart sank when he told me what he was asking for - a long term lease for \$2000 per month.

When I went back and told the prayer team, their faith rose to the occasion! I was assured that our Father had the resources. So we began a crusade of talking up and praying up what was certainly a human impossibility. Starting with the Sunday night prayer group, then taking God's Children into churches and speaking about God's vision for an off-campus coffeehouse, people began coming like they did to Jesus and saying "me too."

The business savvy Landlord required a financially responsible organization to sign the lease. I now knew I needed to receive not only ordination from my

denomination, but also needed a larger miracle. God would have to move on my Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church USA to ordain me, to assign me to the Assemblies of God, and they would have to “receive” me as a clergyman and (gasp) to sign this huge lease.

Somewhat miraculously the Presbyterians approved me. My wife had told me the Lord described me as “a Timothy”. She had read the epistles of Timothy to see what that might mean concluding it had something to do with evangelism based on II Timothy 4:5. The Presbyterian Book of Order formerly had allowed ordination for the calling of “evangelist”. Oddly, that had been removed some years before, perhaps because the denomination was no longer very evangelical. Now we just ordained pastors and professors.

The Presbytery meeting arrived and when my request for ordination came up, a large dispute broke out on the floor over whether I could be ordained for a non-pastoral assignment. It was an unusual procedure. It seemed like the over 100 attendees were arguing all at once. Suddenly a visiting missionary stood up and asked to speak. In a strong voice he said, “I move we ordain this man as a minister without pastoral charge!” He turned to me and said in prophetic tones, “Do the work of an Evangelist; fulfill your ministry: II Tim 4:5”. A local AG pastor, Dick Kreeger, was very supportive of our idea and arranged for me to meet with the District Council of the Assemblies of God (which was also called a presbytery meeting). He and I were prepared to make our extraordinary request. I had attended their meetings before with Brother Royce, so we knew each other. But would they trust me, a Presbyterian, to serve the Assemblies? After all the miracles so far, I must admit that my faith was running low for asking the very strict Assemblies to accept a Presbyterian ordination. All morning long they kept putting off our part of their meeting. Then they took a lunch break. When the meeting finally resumed they took us up on the agenda. After a big, wonderful meal, these elders (literally elderly gentlemen) kept falling asleep during our presentation. I feared we had lost them. When Bro. Kreeger and I had finished, only two of the men appeared to be awake. The District Superintendent called for a vote. His sudden voice startled the elders. They snapped awake and, with no delay, all declared “aye”. (Does God have a sense of humor, or what?) THE WELL was one miraculous success. Hundreds of God’s people (young and old) started showing up, volunteering to make this project successful. A Christian man (Jack Ender), who had an air conditioner business, showed up one day and repaired the five or so huge air conditioning systems that hadn’t run in years. Since we would be serving food, the Health Department required many things including a huge commercial vent hood over the kitchen range. Billy Wilson, who built equipment for fast food restaurants, came up with that for us. Others provided freezers and refrigerators, sheets and pillows (the building had a whole floor of dormitory- rooms), carpets and rugs, paint and everything imaginable to renovate this old building. Folks came with paint brushes and rollers. A sound system and stage lighting was installed. Christian musicians were streaming our way and over the next years some would suddenly show up from other cities to provide an entertainment/testimony that would draw street people and UT students in to hear the gospel in a musical genre they could relate to. God’s Children evolved into what we now called The New Sound. For most people who now heard this anointed musical group, it really was a new

sound! THE WELL was packed out on Friday and Saturday nights. Then on Sunday nights our prayer meeting was packed out with hundreds of people young and old.

Living water began to flow from this new well. Thousands of thirsty people came from far and wide to drink from it over the next years.