

## From XP to P; With Plenty of Change In Between

A "Personal" Case Study by Ray Glenn; Former Executive Pastor of Village Bible Church in Hot Springs Village, AR. and Now Pastor of Swan Lake Church in Cottonwood, MN.

### Introduction

*The winds of change had been blowing for several years. Not in response to a particular problem, a mid life crisis nor lack of ministry fulfillment, but rather a persistent, gentle unsettledness resulting in a re-evaluation of life goals, ministry skills and God's ultimate purposes; a journey of faith, growth and learning.*

This is how Pastor Ray would describe the last several years of ministry. While certain circumstances make his experience unique there are also applicable truths to anyone experiencing changes in ministry.

*"It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly...who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best know in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who have never known neither victory nor defeat."*  
Theodore Roosevelt

### Village Bible Church: Hot Springs Village, AR.

Village Bible Church is located in the heart of Hot Springs Village, a retirement and recreational community fifty miles southwest of Little Rock off of I-30. With over twelve thousand residents, Hot Springs Village is the largest gated community in the United States. It includes nine golf courses and six major recreational lakes in addition to walking trails, swimming pools and tennis courts. Many people from Texas, California and the upper mid west have chosen to call The Village home. The majority of residents are upper middle class, retired, healthy and mobile. Most residents are part of the "builder" generation with traditional values and high commitment.



Village Bible Church began as a church

plant of the Evangelical Free Church of America in Hot Springs Village in July of 1982. The church has experienced twenty-five years of healthy and steady growth, with a commitment to the teaching of God's Word, to personal spiritual growth and to world missions. The mission statement of Village Bible Church states:

*Village Bible Church glorifies God by making disciples who become growing and serving followers of Jesus Christ.*<sup>1</sup>

Aligned with the mission statement, is a vision statement:  
*Building the Kingdom of God by the Word of God.*<sup>2</sup>

Village Bible Church continues to be affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of America and its doctrinal positions.

**Dr. Mark Cain** came to Village Bible Church in October 1997 from Pennsylvania where he had pastored for 17 years. He holds a graduate degree from Dallas Theological Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary. Through sound Bible teaching and compassionate pastoral care, he ministers to the congregation of Village Bible Church. Pastor Mark sums up his ministry at VBC in a statement from a letter sent to recent visitors:

*"My personal goal in ministry is to help facilitate the process of "glorifying God by making disciples who become growing and serving followers of Jesus Christ." One primary way of doing that is through what we term authentic worship. In each of our services we endeavor to meet with God through song -- usually both the grand old hymns of the faith as well as more contemporary songs -- and through the preaching of the Bible. My number one investment each week is the preparation of a biblical, relevant and applicable message. I always strive to speak from the Bible to the real world in which we live."* Mark Cain<sup>3</sup>

**Pastor Ray Glenn** began his ministry as associate pastor at Village Bible Church in June 1999. A graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, he had previously ministered in Virginia and North Carolina. With increased staffing and administrative concerns in addition to the demands of a new building program Pastor Ray transitioned into the new role of executive pastor. In this role, he worked closely with Pastor Mark on specific ministry needs and cared for the day-to-day ministry needs of the church by overseeing the ministry council and church staff. Both Pastors worked very well together and complimented the

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<sup>1</sup> Sportsman, Shirley. Welcome to Village Bible Church. Hot Springs Village, AR. 2006

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cain, Mark. Village Bible Church. Feb 2002. Village Bible Church. 12 June 2007.  
<http://www.villagebiblechurchsv.org>.

churches overall ministry.

Ray has been married to Marlene for twenty-three years. They have four children. Jennifer who will leave for college this fall, Andrew, a junior in high school, Ashleigh age twelve and Kaytie age ten. They have lived in North Carolina and Arkansas so this will be the second large move for them.

### **Swan Lake Evangelical Free Church, Cottonwood, MN.**

Cottonwood, MN is located in the southwest corner of Minnesota about two hours west of the twin cities and a hour and a half from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Cottonwood along with Granite Falls, Redwood Falls and Marshall establish a four-city commerce and community hub. Perhaps a recent Chamber of Commerce write up best describes the smallest of these four towns.



*Cottonwood, Minnesota located on beautiful Cottonwood Lake in southwestern Minnesota's Lyon County is the home of approximately 1200 residents. Cottonwood offers its residents both the advantages of a small community and the conveniences of a growing town. It's a quiet, friendly town in which the values and traditions of the past*

*haven't been lost. Cottonwood provides its people with the necessities and pleasures of modern life by keeping pace with modern social and economic developments because of its numerous services and nearness to larger commercial centers.<sup>4</sup>*

Cottonwood is home to NorthStar Mutual Insurance Company, the Cottonwood Co-op Fuel Company, about a dozen other growing small businesses and of course numerous farms both large and small. Southwest Minnesota State University is located in Marshall and Swan Foods also locates their headquarters in Marshall.

### **Swan Lake Evangelical Free Church**

*"The early pioneers of southwest Minnesota worked to carve an existence out of the wind blown prairie; and they held just as firmly to the deep faith that carried them through the trials of settling the territory. Swan Lake Evangelical Free Church has roots that reach back to that faith; which over the years have remained implanted in the Word of God, drawing back on His strength for nourishment and hope."<sup>5</sup>*

The first sparks of church life in this area flickered from the hearts of their simple homes leading to the organization of the Argyle Presbyterian Church. In 1890 the first Swan Lake building was erected

<sup>4</sup> City of Cottonwood. 8 June 2007. <http://cottonwood.govoffice2.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Galbreth, Randy. History of Swan Lake EFCA. Cottonwood, MN. Revised May 2002.

south of Cottonwood on Co. Rd. 9. with extensive improvements being made in 1949 with the moving of the church from its original foundation and being set over a full basement.



In 1992 the country church building was sold and remodeled into a family home and a new sanctuary established in the town of Cottonwood proper. The congregation affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of America in 1983 and in 2002 a new sanctuary and additional classrooms were added to house the growing church family.

In 2005, Swan Lake Church planted a new church in the near by community of Granite Falls, fifteen miles north. Today Swan Lake ministers to a growing congregation reaching into Cottonwood and surrounding communities. The church ministers to many young families with an average age of thirty six. Many come to Swan Lake with a Lutheran Church background. The Swan Lake Church congregation is tied to either the agricultural, educational, food service or medical sector. Its ongoing mission is

*“to honor God by helping people find and follow Jesus Christ.”*<sup>6</sup>

Sunday services are focused on worship and the preaching of the Word with a blend of contemporary and more traditional music. Weekly worship attendance averages around one hundred and fifty. Swan Lake Church obviously has a heart for the teaching and application of God’s Word. The congregation is bound together with a rich sense of community, which also spills over into the larger community of Cottonwood. The church family is intensely interested in reaching the community, with significant outreaches into the local public school and Southwest Minnesota State University through The Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Special lunch events are hosted for local business leaders and they provide ongoing programs for children in the community.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## The Process of Change

So just what was the process of moving from an executive pastor position in Arkansas to take on the role of pastor in rural Minnesota? The actual process of changing ministry involved several years of praying, evaluating and consideration. During this time, strategic people were included in the process to



confirm God's hand. The final decision was confirmed in the Fall of 2006 through LEAD, Leadership Evaluation and Development, a course conducted by the Center for Christian Leadership at Dallas Theological Seminary. LEAD's purpose;

*As you move toward the second half of your journey, we desire to affirm the many ways God has blessed and worked in and through your life...in the first half. We also want to better understand what He is up to in the second half and give you some developmental "tracks" to run on to fulfill His dreams for you.....LEAD is designed to help you better fulfill God's purposes in your life.<sup>7</sup>*

Through the final evaluation review by Brad Smith of LEAD was the statement:

*"Because Ray has some "tweener gifts", he could continue as an Executive Pastor or be a Sr. Pastor in a church the size he is in now."<sup>8</sup>*

The actual process of connecting with Swan Lake Church went very smoothly and moved rather quickly. After several personal and family visits and numerous phone and email conversations, Swan Lake extended a call to Pastor Ray and his family. It became obvious rather quickly that this move was more than just a change of ministry position, but was going to be a cultural, regional, and ministry move that would involve considerable adjustment from the entire family of six.

The first steps of change involved developing and executing an "exit plan" for leaving Village Bible Church - well. Through the candidating process at Swan Lake Church, Pastor Ray was able to include and solicit the prayer support of Pastor Mark and several key elders. Pastor Ray chose to pick up on Village Bible Church's vision statement: *Building the Kingdom of God by the Word of God*<sup>9</sup> as his foundation for communicating to the church family concerning his departure. Over the next several months, Pastor Ray shared his decision with the entire elder board, other staff members, the ministry council members and then finally the entire congregation.



Pastor Ray used the following weeks to thank the church for the years of support

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<sup>7</sup> LEAD: Leadership Evaluation & Development, Dallas Seminary. November 2006

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Brad Smith, 30 November 2006

<sup>9</sup> Church Vision Statement, Village Bible Church. Hot Springs Village, Arkansas

and ministry and to confirm their on going ministry so that they might see his departure as just another step in their vision of expanding the Kingdom of God. Key ministry responsibilities were handed off to other staff and lay leaders. In the end, Ray and his family leaving Village Bible Church, while difficult, was handled in a positive and timely manner. Pastor Mark's closing words at an appreciation celebration sums it up well:

*Ray, there is great joy in seeing you step out in faith for this next chapter God has for you. In Him, you are ready – you are ready in Jesus. In a serious vein, Ray I will miss you. I will miss your willingness to tackle any duty I asked over the last eight years. I will miss your faith and optimism, often expressed with a single statement: Aww, It'll be fine! or It'll work out – even when you did not have a clue as to how it would work out or be fine, but it always did. I will miss the “iron sharpening iron” discussions we had about every thing from theology to the latest fad to hit Christendom to ...well...other things we talked about that I dare not put in print. I will miss your wisdom and discernment, I will miss your friendship. I will miss your passion for a party – every time I would leave – whether six weeks for a sabbatical or just a week of vacation, my return was always an occasion to party.*

*I do have a bit of ministerial wisdom in all seriousness to pass on to you. It's a philosophy of ministry that I read not too long ago, briefly summed up from Stuart Briscoe, recently retired form Elmbrook Church in Milwaukee. It's a pretty good one: PREACH THE WORD, LOVE THE PEOPLE, AND PRAY FOR THE SPIRIT TO MOVE MIGHTILY.*

## **The Challenges of Change**

After a three-day journey, two twenty-eight foot Penski rental trucks, a bad alternator and twelve hundred miles, the move for a family of six, a dog and two rabbits was complete. Houses were sold and bought and a new adventure was about to begin. Although the transition is still very recent, already specific cultural and ministry changes are obvious.

## **A New Church Community**

Church community and relationships while important at Village Bible Church, pales in comparison to the relational aspects of ministry at Swan Lake Church. Many in the congregation have strong family ties or grew up with one another sharing school experiences and early life experiences. Today, many work together throughout the week with various employers and interact throughout the week with their children at the YMCA or ball fields. They have and continue to grow close to one another through mutual life experiences. As a result, relationship is much more important than schedules, timetables or project completion dates.

## **Informal Ministry**

Coming from Village Bible Church where Pastor Rays' day was rather structured and where much of his job was to develop structure and programs and where he would not think twice about making appointments with individuals, this was a change. Now he must slow down and realize ministry and appointments occur throughout the day as you interact with people on the street, in the post office or across the fence.

## **Relational Ministry**

With high relational ministry also comes high accessibility. Everyone sees the pastor as a friend and expects full accessibility. They want to see you engaged and involved with church, community and family events and they might be hurt if you are not. Whereas before Pastor Ray might have been granted additional time or another staff person might of handle the visit from the church, now Pastor Ray realizes smaller congregation expect him to personally enter into the celebration of a new birth or the sorrow of an accident or illness. One writer sums it up this way:

*"In general small churches are unusually informal – and want the pastor to be also. Suggestions like, "Why don't you call the office and make an appointment to see me?" may be offensive to some. Pastors who are loved by a small congregation are usually those willing to be available in the grocery store and post office as well as the church office. The highly relational nature of the small church encourages accessibility."*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Daman, Glenn. *How to Thrive As A Small Church Pastor* (Grand Rapids. Kregel Publications, 2002) 67.

### **Accessibility**

This informality and accessibility also relates to the business and decision making process of the church. At Village Bible Church there was a highly organized and detail process for making decisions and accomplishing specific tasks - perhaps too structured. In smaller relational churches, decisions are made quickly after services in the foyer with one or two church leaders or even at the grocery store while picking out a can of soup. Plans and events rather than following a school or church calendar are much more susceptible to an agricultural calendar with plenty of leeway given to planting and harvest.

### **Power Brokers**

Obviously, many smaller churches also have key power brokers, individuals who directly or indirectly orchestrate much of what happens. As one district superintendent told Ray: *"quickly learn your power brokers, forge a relationship with them. They may not always agree with you and that is ok., but you must garner their respect."* The challenge is fulfilling ministry as God is directing and keeping these individuals on "his side" so they do not become hindrances to over-all church health.

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Challenges of Change**

Village Bible Church, although it did have some specific distinctives such as being located in a gated recreational and retirement community, could effectively be summed up as a rather affluent suburban type church ministry. Programs were mainly staff directed with lay supported. With growth at Village Bible came the necessity for the careful planning of resources, time and space. There was a certain expectation of excellence in programming. Smaller ministries are much more forgiving and actually the relational aspect of ministry usurps the program.

## **A New Social Culture**

In a world of corn and soybean fields, endless hot dishes, the long daylight days of summer, cool evenings, time spent with friends and the occasional “uff du”, this also becomes the social fabric that is a small closely knit community. Relationships are as key on Main Street as in the church pew. Everyone knows just about everyone and knows much about him or her.

### **Building Relationships**

It has been interesting for Pastor Ray and his family, as they have settled into life in Cottonwood over the past two months. While on a tremendous learning curve of names and people, everyone already knows them by name. It is not unusual for Ray to walk into a business and hear “O, you are the new pastor over at Swan Lake, it is good to meet you.” Recently on a trip to Marshall (thirteen miles south) to register their vehicles, Ray was astonished to interact with a lady that could process his registration but also knew his name, the house he bought and details about his family. There is little anonymity in rural Cottonwood and there is a realization that news and communication travels quickly by word of mouth.

### **The Matters of Time**

A quick trip to the dry cleaners can easily take forty-five minutes as you interact with individuals, to move along too swiftly will be seen as rude. One recent day, Pastor Ray left the house with several stops in mind fully anticipating being at church in thirty-five to forty minutes – an hour and a half later he pulled into work and even at that, felt he had pulled away too quickly in a couple of conversations. Just like the agriculture calendar, time is measured not in minutes and hours but rather in seasons and relationships.

### **The Matters of Trust**

It remains to be seen how accepting and truly trusting such a tight community will ultimately become. True trust will most likely be fostered over time. As Ray and his family have met neighbors, some have been incredibly warm and inviting, others have been almost scared, choosing to stop conversation and relationships at the front door, at least for now. It is hoped that time and genuineness will develop the trust necessary to minister not just to the church family but to the community as well.

### **Agricultural Roots and Annual Calendars**

Obviously the community is likewise tied to an agricultural calendar. Unlike Hot Springs Village where the only agricultural concern might be purchasing peaches out of the back of a vendors truck or ears of corn in the produce market at Kroger’s, planting, harvest and the weather in between are all important in rural Cottonwood. With the short planting season of the northern climate,

timing is everything, there are no second chances. Two weeks of drought or five minutes of damaging winds or hail can quickly take away the twenty percent profit margin for the year. All else must stop when planting or harvest time arrives. These dates are relative and depend fully on the year's crop, however once underway, fifteen and twenty hour days by many is not unusual. Other business - including extra church functions must be placed on hold.

### **Independent/Codependence**

Agriculture, strong family ties, and harsh climates, develops a community of hard working individuals dependent upon one another for success. This independent, codependence is Cottonwood. It is a recommitment to hard work and a can do mentality. There is also the realization that to truly succeed they are ultimately dependant upon one another. They realize this and they are smart enough to accept it. This attitude is seen in Cottonwood's large and productive farming co-op which has allowed this community to survive and flourish. This co-op includes the purchase of seed, fertilizer, equipment, etc. but also the harvesting, selling and transportation of goods. The fuel co-op was the first fuel co-op in this country and is benefiting the farmers and local residents. As noted earlier, this same independent codependence is also evident within church community.



## **A New Ministry Role**

As an executive pastor, much of Pastor Ray's time was spent overseeing staff members, working with the ministry council members to accomplish the work of ministry, addressing problem areas and pastoral duties as needed. Transitioning to Swan Lake Church is going to bring about numerous changes in ministry task, however, many items will stay the same. Already, after only a couple of months some of those similarities and differences are evident.

## **New Responsibilities:**

An overview of Pastor Ray's responsibilities at Swan Lake Church can be found in the opening paragraphs of his job description:

*"The ministry of Sr. Pastor will be accomplished primarily by preaching and teaching the Word of God, equipping and mentoring staff and lay leaders for effective ministry, and shepherding God's flock through pastoral care. In concert with the elder's, he will communicate the overall mission, values and strategy of the churches ministry."*

Obviously, there is the new responsibility of leading and feeding a church family weekly from God's Word. Of praying and seeking God's heart for himself and for this small church family weekly. This will involve building upon the relational aspect of ministry that is a large part of the DNA of Swan Lake Church to bring solid biblical truth to bear on daily life. It will also involve carving out time for study and reflection in the midst of a climate of relationships and accessibility.

## **New Expectations**

In addition, there is the whole area of expectation. Job descriptions are rather clear on paper but can become very cloudy in reality. At Village Bible Church, no one was from Hot Springs Village; everyone had lived his or her life somewhere else and had moved to Hot Springs Village. Many times they came with preconceived ideas about what church and church staff could be and should be doing. Many felt we were to fulfill the role of church as they had experienced in previous churches, yet we could explain and often did during Inquirer's Classes - *"we are not your former church."*

The role of executive pastor was also a new role for Village Bible Church. It was a new concept for many of the members, perhaps too new, and so many people never knew exactly what it was Pastor Ray did. They knew he was busy and worked in numerous areas but they would have been hard pressed to produce a job description.

At Swan Lake Church that ministry is a little more clearly understood. There is a hundred plus year tradition of pastors that have served this congregation; preach the Word on Sunday, visit during the week and provide an appropriate degree of leadership and care - much beyond this is icing on the cake. As stated earlier, the congregation is looking for someone to live life with them and to love them. To help them pick up the pieces when life falls apart, to be there and to understand.

### **New Accountability:**

As executive pastor, Ray often saw his ministry as intercepting issues before they reached Pastor Mark's desk and resolving them. He worked to protect and to some degree insulate Mark from many of the issues of day-to-day ministry, yet there was also the comradery and dependence that comes from team ministry. It was not ministry in a vacuum; both Pastor Mark and Pastor Ray achieved a great deal of support from one another.

The role of executive pastor while incredibly important and influential within a congregation, often does offer a layer of protection with the senior pastor. While things might go well ninety-nine percent of the time, it is that one percent people will quickly jump on as a problem. Yes, it is an executive pastors' problem, but ultimately it is the senior pastors' problem. If not resolved quickly and properly by the executive pastor, it will ultimately end up on the senior pastor's desk. At Swan Lake that final desk is Pastor Ray's, there is no one else. Fortunately, Pastor Ray sees much of his experience as an executive pastor intercepting and solving problems as on the job training for his new role as senior pastor.

### **New Relationships**

Obviously new ministries bring the joy of developing new friendships. However, Pastor Ray finds that he already misses having numerous staff around just to interact with throughout the day. Without additional staff, except a part time secretary, Pastor Ray has already realized the importance of taking care of himself spiritually, emotionally and physically. While a very supportive elder board is in place, the responsibility for daily personal care falls to him.

Pastor Ray is also realizing he must be the gatekeeper of his own schedule, to know when enough is enough. The importance of scheduling down time, protecting private time in prayer and time to enjoy family and hobbies. As the crunch of moving passes, he looks forward to achieving a better balance in these areas.

Pastor Ray sees the need and value of developing relationships with others, both ministry colleagues from other churches and friends from outside the church.

This will provide that safety net of encouragement, accountability and enjoyment. He has already begun this process and plans to do more.

### **New Ministry**

This leads to another area of ministry and of doing ministry. At Village Bible Church, Pastor Ray was able to interact and work through a staff of twelve full and part-time employees. There were individuals with giftedness, expertise and insights into specific areas of ministry. Now he is finding a need to be a “generalized expert” in all these areas; whether music, sound, Christian education or missions.

In smaller congregations, ministry is led by lay people, but laity who are many times looking for vision, leadership training and encouragement as they lead ministries. Not unlike the role of executive pastor, the Sr. Pastor in the small church goes above and beyond to provide encouragement and to show genuine appreciation. Pastor Ray is committed to developing lay leaders who feel called and are trained to lead in ministry. He knows that without additional staff he is very dependent upon those lay leaders around him. Developing lay workers in particular areas of ministry and then releasing them to minister with responsibility and the full trust of their pastor is essential.

### **New Model of Leadership Development:**

One last yet similar area of ministry is developing church leaders for today and the future. In the small church, you do not have the luxury of additional staff leaders so you must be committed to training spiritual leaders to help oversee the churches ministry. This can often be difficult with family and work responsibilities but making two or three others a part of your daily ministry can be helpful. Ray has decided to spend extra time specifically discipling men and helping them grow in Christ to allow God to work through them. This might be a several year process but it is believed the dividends and investment will pay off.

### **Closing:**

Obviously much more could be said and should be said about major transitions in life. Pastor Ray and his wife Marlene have found themselves joking about

taking a stress evaluation right now given the level of change in their lives. Yet God has been abundantly faithful; as a family everyone is still laughing.

Ray looks back on his years as an executive pastor as a timely training ground for his new role. He is excited about the coming years of ministry.