

Warehouse History

Louis Neely sensed the call of God on his life when he was a boy of only twelve years old. But at the time, he refused to listen and respond to that call. In fact, the refusal was so strong the day it came that he received a quick whack on the back of his head for bursting out with a loud "No!" in the middle of the church service. He had grown up in the home of a preacher, and had determined early on in his life that if there was one thing he was not going to be, it was a preacher! His sights were set on being a night club singer and stand-up comedian. Louis felt he had won the battle that day in church, minus a little pain at the back of his cranium. But time was on God's side. He had plans for Louis, and was not going to give up that easily. Louis would learn later that in the end God always wins.

Louis spent his teenage years doing what most healthy young Texas boys did at the time--play football, race cars, and act tough. He had a bent toward pushing the limits of permissibility with his parents and the law though, which kept his father diligently praying for him during those days. There was never an early morning when Louis did not hear his father's prayers echoing through the heater vents of the house: "Lord, I thank you for the wonderful children you have blessed us with, but I'm concerned about Louis, and I know you are too." Louis would bury his head under his pillow trying to drown out the reverberating voice.

One night, shortly after graduating from high school, as Louis was driving home late from a date, he received a wake-up call. Unable to stop in time, because of excessive speed and youthful arrogance, he rammed his automobile into the back of another car. The impact of the collision plunged the steering column of his car into the driver's seat, missing his chest by inches. As he sat in his car contemplating the nearly fatal experience he had just survived, the voice of the Lord quietly began to intrude upon his other thoughts. This time Louis said "yes" and from that day on dedicated himself to serving Jesus Christ with all of his heart and strength.

His first assignment as a "minister" came when he told his father a couple of days after the car accident that he was called to the ministry. His father answered, "Great! Here is a mop and a bucket. The restrooms of the church need to be cleaned." Although Louis did not recognize the full significance of this first lesson in the ministry at the time, it turned out to be one of the most important. The word "minister" means "servant" and so, being called to the ministry literally means to be called to full-time servanthood to God and his people.

God placed a red-hot fire in Louis' heart to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. Fortunately, Louis was a preacher without an audience those first few weeks. God would have to temper his servant before he was sent out, but what the young Louis lacked in wisdom, he made up for with enthusiasm and passion. One day while his father was out of town, a couple came to the church looking for some help with a bitter dispute they were having. Louis naively took it upon himself to give them some marriage counseling. At the end of the session the man and woman were so united in their anger toward Louis that they forgot about why they had been fighting.

As time went on the Lord began to provide opportunities for Louis to share with others what burned in his heart. And in just a couple of years, Louis found himself traveling all over the south western United States speaking as an evangelist at literally any church that would have him. At the peak of this period of his life, he spoke over 320 separate times in a single year.

It was during this time that Louis met his wife Mary. She was a woman blessed with tremendous vision and faith. In fact, she agreed to marry Louis after only two dates! Together, Louis and Mary became an effective team used by God to carry his message of hope and salvation to the world.

God expanded Louis and Mary's ministry to include not only the southern and western states, but the world. They traveled extensively throughout Africa, India, the Middle East, and Brazil, preaching the Gospel. While traveling around the world, meeting and working with people from all kinds of different cultures and backgrounds, the Lord instilled in them a global Christian perspective. The "church" is not simply the building at the end of the street in our neighborhood. It is the Body of Christ throughout the world. Denominational divisions are products of human beings. The unifying and pervading truths of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are from God.

Mary was seven months pregnant with their only child, Julissa, when they felt it necessary to find a place to settle, at least for a few months. Through the generosity of a friend a small apartment was provided for them in Sacramento,

California. Shortly after Julissa was born, Louis, Mary, and the baby were off again. The call to worldwide evangelism was as strong as ever. They had no idea at the time that one day soon God was going to call them back to Sacramento to begin a work that would become Warehouse Christian Ministries.

Sacramento became Louis and Mary's semipermanent home. Mary and the baby would often remain behind in Sacramento as Louis continued to travel, preaching. During her stay in Sacramento, Mary found herself talking with a number of young people, answering questions they had about the Bible. Before long these informal question and answer sessions grew into an actual Bible study taught by Mary.

Louis would return home to find the apartment filled with kids, all studying the Bible together. At first Louis was a little annoyed at the intrusion into his home, but the Lord began to show him that these kids were searching for the same thing everyone else was--answers to the big questions of life. Louis and Mary sensed a tremendous hunger among the young people for spiritual truth and reality. Meeting this need was more important than any inconvenience it might have caused.

Not long after this, on one of Louis' speaking engagements in India as he was traveling between Calcutta and Bombay, the Lord told him very clearly to turn his attention back toward his homeland. This was a difficult thing for Louis to accept, since it meant leaving a very fruitful, exciting, and well established ministry for the unknown. But he knew he had to follow God's call.

Louis returned to Sacramento and he and Mary began to seek God's more specific direction on how to reach the young people of the city. Cultural relevance was a large issue that had to be addressed. In the years Louis and Mary had been traveling abroad, the nation had changed dramatically. They found themselves in the middle of a new culture: the hippy movement, the Vietnam War, rock music, drugs, and experimental dabbling in the eastern religions. Being brought up with a conservative background and working within a very conservative church denomination made some of these things hard for Louis to accept initially. But God had taught him and Mary, during their work among peoples of varying cultures, that the Gospel is always relevant, and it is our responsibility to reach across cultural boundaries to make it so. The Great Commission is to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, making disciples of all people. They had a firm conviction that the same principle they had applied in foreign countries had to also be applied in Sacramento.

After much prayer and careful consideration they began to take the necessary steps to begin an outreach to young people that would present the spiritual truth of Christ with cultural relevance. A local Christian businessman, who shared their vision, gave them the use of some empty warehouse space. They had already been using one of the businessman's offices after hours for Mary's Bible study, which had outgrown the apartment. Now they needed even more space for the weekly Bible study, but more importantly, they needed a place to do musical outreaches. Rock music had become a powerful medium being used by the younger generation to express their anger, frustration, pain, and rebellion. Louis and Mary believed this same musical style could be used as a powerful medium for communicating the love and hope offered in the Gospel.

Louis, filled with excitement about the vision he believed God had given him and Mary, began to share it with other local leaders within his denomination. His initial intent was to establish a city-wide center for all of the churches (within his denomination) to use for youth activities and evangelism. He was about to face one of the most difficult trials of his life. To his great surprise and bewilderment, these other leaders did not share his vision. In their opinion, he was simply trying to build another church in too close of proximity to already established churches. In addition, they felt the needs of the youth were already being addressed. There were even a few who believed it inappropriate, to say the least, to use the "Devil's music" to communicate the Gospel. Louis was told if he continued along the course he had set, they would have to ask him to disavow himself from the denomination and his ordination would be in jeopardy.

What would Louis and Mary do now? Should they continue with the vision and face certain excommunication? What if they were wrong about the whole thing? Maybe they had misunderstood the Lord? Perhaps this whole thing really was a hair-brain idea that needed to simply be put to rest and forgotten. Beyond all the questions and doubts and fears, the clear call of God was inescapable once again. They knew they had to move ahead with the outreach, in spite of all of the naysayers.

They found themselves alone now, except for the young people still coming to the Bible study and a few Christian businessmen who continued to share the vision. At one time Louis had been one of just a handful of evangelists within his whole denomination that did large-scale worldwide evangelistic campaigns. Now he wasn't even an ordained minister anymore.

Then, while Mary was reading through "LIFE" magazine she came across an article on the "Jesus Movement" taking place in southern California. At the center of this great revival was a man named Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. Mary immediately had a strong sense that Chuck Smith was going to be involved somehow in the Sacramento outreach. She felt compelled to visit the Calvary Chapel ministry. So, she and a few of the young people from her Bible study got on a plane and flew to Costa Mesa. They attended a Christian rock concert Saturday night, saw dozens of young people receive Christ as Savior that evening, then attended one of the church services the next morning.

Mary wanted to try to meet the man before she returned to Sacramento, even though the huge number of people attending the church made it very difficult. As impossible as it seemed, Mary not only met Chuck Smith, but he invited her and the others to have lunch with him! During lunch Mary described what God had begun doing in Sacramento and what she and Louis wanted to do with this warehouse building. Chuck Smith immediately recognized the hand of God at work. He agreed to come up to Sacramento to dedicate the "new" building. After meeting with Louis personally, Chuck Smith also agreed to reestablish Louis' ordination under his own spiritual authority and covering.

The route Louis and Mary had originally embarked on took a number of unexpected turns, but the Lord had been leading them through it all. They were now standing at the edge of new ministry frontier. Warehouse Christian Ministries officially opened its doors on April 28, 1974.

Warehouse Christian Ministries, or simply Warehouse, as it would come to be called by those who attend, started doing weekly Saturday night concerts with their own band assembled from some of the young people attending the Bible study. They would play music for about an hour, and then Louis would present a simple Gospel message, inviting people to come to Christ. A few months later Warehouse was able to also draw upon the many Calvary Chapel bands and musicians that would travel up from southern California on a concert circuit. Over the course of the next few years, these concerts became the heart of an evangelistic thrust into the Sacramento community that would be used by youth groups and churches from as far away as Napa to the west and Reno, Nevada to the east. God expanded the original vision Louis and Mary had of a youth outreach for the denomination they had been a part of, to one that served the whole region.

Believing the ministry would grow quickly, Louis initially purchased 500 chairs for the Warehouse auditorium. The first Sunday morning service had a total of six people in attendance. A few weeks into this new ministry, Louis got up to preach his Sunday morning sermon to a completely empty auditorium. No one came--even his wife and daughter happened to be out of town that morning. The subject of his sermon was "faith," so he preached it to himself. At that moment, it was obvious he needed to hear the message more than anyone. This same attitude has constantly been a part of Louis' conviction about preaching. The preacher must never pretend to be something other than a human being in desperate need of the forgiveness and grace of God. He must always be preaching as much to himself as to anyone else listening. From these meager beginnings, the ministry has grown into a thriving church with as many as 6,000 adults and children attending on Sundays.

The Saturday night concerts were merely the beginning of an exploration into relevant and effective ways of communicating the truth of Christ to a searching world. Louis, Mary, and the others who joined them in the work at Warehouse, ventured into the areas of drama, music, poetry, painting, dance, exposés of the culture, and apologetics. No area of secular society and culture is beyond the reach of the Gospel.

Born out of concern over a lack of discernment, on the part of both the secular and church worlds, Mary and a couple of others started a radio show to present an alternate point of view on modern culture. This radio show started life as "Rock and Religion," put together in a back room using a small tape recorder, and a razor blade and tape for editing. It grew into a program called "Rock Scope" which was heard on over 200 radio stations across the United States. The show was a hard hitting analysis of contemporary media figures and trends, with an emphasis on, but not limited to, popular music. It featured interviews with such people as radical political activist and former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead, and pop singer Debby Boone. The show's investigative series on the religious roots of rock and roll also provided the raw material for two books.

God drew, and continues to draw, dozens of extremely talented and gifted musicians and song writers to Warehouse. In the early days, the Saturday night concerts and Sunday worship services provided a great environment for them to develop their gifts and skills. It became apparent, however, that the unique music of the church should be shared beyond the borders of Sacramento. The Lord expanded the vision again, this time to include a recording studio and record label that would enable Warehouse to distribute their musical message to the world. The first records were designed to appeal to young alternative and college music fans. These records were widely accepted all over the country. As things have progressed, the music has spanned everything from country music to rap.

A number of original drama and musical productions have also been presented at Warehouse, covering a wide range of subjects and themes. There have been numerous Christmas and Easter programs, as well as plays, like "Johnson and Sons" which wrestles with the issues of AIDS, forgiveness and the message of Christ.

The church continues to explore new ways of speaking the timeless message to the people of this generation, through the arts. Art exhibits have been presented in the lobby of the church on Sunday mornings. Gallery W, the church's art gallery, has garnered critical respect and admiration from the national and international art community. Christian artists from around the world look to Warehouse as an invaluable resource. Louis and Mary have always encouraged people to let the Word of God (the Bible) establish boundaries, rather than tradition, and to look to the Holy Spirit as the source for inspiration and creative power.

Children have always held a special place in the hearts of Louis and Mary. Soon after Warehouse was founded, a kid's summer camp program was established, which continues to this day with almost 400 children attending camp each year. In addition to camps, a children's Academy of the Arts was started in 1991, which includes painting, sculpture, music, drama, and writing. At a time when the public education system is cutting back on its arts education, Warehouse is stepping in to address the need, and to raise a new generation of cultural leaders for our world.

In the midst of a heavy emphasis on the arts, Louis and Mary have never forgotten that Christian fellowship and Bible study was the starting point and remains the lifeblood of Warehouse. In addition to the sound Biblical teaching by Louis on Sundays, the church offers a number of other ministries that address the unique needs of different groups. There are men's and women's Bible Fellowships, alcohol and drug abuse recovery groups, college and singles Bible studies, and specific programs for junior and senior high students.

Warehouse has sought to follow the New Testament church model as closely as possible. There is no formal membership. There are no denominational creeds. There is no dress code, direct or implied. There is no place for racism or bigotry. The Bible is considered the inspired inerrant authoritative Word of God. Jesus Christ is believed to be the incarnate Son of God, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). It is believed that God has called every Christian to some kind of ministry. The job of the church is to equip its people for these works of service, to build up the Body of Christ and carry the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the world.

Louis and Mary had no idea when it all began where the Lord was going to lead them. Through their undying love for Jesus Christ, driving desire for everyone to come to know him, and faith in the sustaining hand of God, the Lord has blessed the world through these people.

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