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CHURCHES - THE HOT ONE

Elmer Towns

Courtesy of Church Growth Today

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He served on faculty at Midwest Bible College, St. Louis, Missouri, (1958-1961); professor and then President at Winnipeg Bible College 1961-1965; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, (1965-1971); co-founder and professor, Liberty Baptist College, Lynchburg, Virginia, (1971-1973); coordinator, Baptist University of America, (1974-1977).

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For the past 30 years I have had a love affair with influential churches - big ones - fast growing ones - churches that technically might be titled model churches that influence a vast section of our nation. These churches are bigger than their community and state; they are as big as the Christian community of

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our nation. These churches put sparkle in our eyes and hope in our hearts because they are doing what most churches cannot do - they reach a lot of people, turn lives around, and their young people go into full time Christian service. These churches are successful, innovative, but most important ... they are alive with revival fires - they are the hot ones.

For the past 30 years I have loved "the hot ones", some up close, others afar off. They made the New Testament live in our century and vindicate my hope that, "the greatest church since Pentecost is yet to be built."

About every five years, a new "hot one" is ignited on the horizon and burns brighter than all of her sisters. This church steps to center stage and becomes the darling of the evangelical world. The pastor speaks at the influential conferences. Church leaders want to study its methods and warm themselves at its fires. Each "hot one" seems to display a new innovative tool to expand ministry. When evangelical leaders from around the nation visit the "hot one," they learn the tool and return home to light their own fires.

In the early 60's the "hot one" was Calvary Temple, Denver, Colorado. Founder and pastor Dr. Charles Blair spoke at most Sunday school conventions and was influential in the NAE (National Association of Evangelicals). The Childhood Education building at Calvary Temple was on the cutting edge of Christian education. Heads were turned when he began constructing a hospital and went on television throughout the Rocky Mountain area. This church was considered the wave of the future.

In the late 60's Jack Hyles marched to the future by retreating to the fundamentals of the past. He set hearts aflame by door to door visitation and Sunday school busing. Each year he broke new attendance records that seemed to be unbreakable; first 3,000 a week in attendance, then 10,000 ... 25,000 ... 50,000 ... he even claimed to break the 100,000 attendance barrier on one Sunday. His yearly pastor's conference registered over 5,000 churches from across the United States and abroad. The delegates returned home with their hearts aflame to build the "fastest growing Sunday school in Chatham County" or the "largest Sunday school in Maryland," or from wherever they came.

Starting a Christian school, building a college or buying a massive cemetery, all to further church growth became a pattern for many other churches. But underneath it all, the First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, went forward by Sunday school buses.

The electronic church came of age in the early 70's with the spread of the *Old Time Gospel Hour* to television across the United States and Canada. Dr.

The Hot Churches	
Early 1960's	Calvary Temple Denver, Colorado Dr. Charles Blair
Late 1960's	First Baptist Church Hammond, Indiana Dr. Jack Hyles
Early 1970's	Thomas Road Baptist Church Lynchburg, Virginia Dr. Jerry Falwell
Late 1970's	Grace Community Church Panorama City, California Dr. John MacArthur
Early 1980's	Yoido Full Gospel Church Seoul, Korea Dr. David Yonggi Cho
Present	Willow Creek Community Church South Barrington, Illinois Pastor Bill Hybels

Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church became the "hot one" in 1971 with the publishing of the book *Church Aflame* and the thesis of saturation evangelism, i.e. using every available means, to reach every available person, at every available time.

All ecclesiastical roads led to Lynchburg, Virginia. The annual Super Conference was organized to equip pastors to saturate their Jerusalem for Christ. Falwell was voted #1 in *Good Housekeeping* magazine's annual poll and was a regular guest on Phil Donahue's television show, as well as a regular guest on Ted Koppel's *Night Line*.

But some did not like the emphasis on televangelism, media, and they felt you could not "sell Jesus Christ like you sell Coca-Cola." The next "hot one" came in the late 70's riding on expositional preaching by Dr. John MacArthur of the Grace Community Church of Panorama City, California, north of Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley. MacArthur rode towards the future by return to Bible preaching, and he signed his letters by the title, "Pastor-Teacher."

Expositional preaching from scriptures, called Bible teaching by others, became the basis for his unique, innovative method of building a church. Those pastors who made the annual trek to his shepherd's conference learned how to preach expositionally like John MacArthur, then they returned home to change their name to Community church, personally study 40 hours a week to prepare sermons, and appoint elders over their church while they gave themselves to "the study of the Word."

MacArthur made the rounds, i.e. the pastoral conferences, the Bible conferences, and do not forget radio. MacArthur reached out to teach the United States and Canada the Word of Grace. MacArthur needed a college like those before him to give foundation to his methodology, so The Master's College became a reality. From all over the nation, students came to study and to warm themselves at this flame, and follow the path to the future which led into the teaching of the Word of God.

With the onset of the 80's came a growing acceptance among American evangelicals of the charismatic and/or Pentecostal expression of Christianity. Charismatics moved to become a part of the road, though not the middle of the road, but definitely were no longer forced off the road. The Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea, was at first only a rumor to many Americans. They heard that over 100,000 a week worshipped in the small groups of the city. Next they heard it was 200,000 ... 300,000 ... 400,000 ... and now a reported 500,000 or more are reached weekly through small groups in this mammoth church. Growth was not based on television, buses, nor Sunday school. The secret was small groups, lay pastors and Prayer Mountain. When Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho visited America, multiplied hundreds of pastors heard him and believed in his methodology. They began warming at his fire. Then multiplied thousands upon thousands visited South Korea to see for themselves and came back carrying a flame, and like the Queen of Sheba testified, "The half hath not been told."

The Korean "hot one" of the early 80's was a journey to the future found in small groups that produced a large church. It was a journey within to spirituality that ultimately reached out and touched a mega city for Christ.

Toward the end of the 80's, America was greatly influenced by marketing, use of friendly user products, and we became a consumer society; no longer an industrial society and surely not a farming society. Bill Hybels built the next "hot one" on a door-to-door survey to determine how to reach "unchurched Harry" and "unchurched Mary" in the western suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. He emphasized removing barriers and creating an environment where doubters would be comfortable and seekers could pursue the truth of the gospel. Like those who have gone before him, Bill Hybels of the Willow Creek Community Church built a pastor's conference out of his innovative methodology. In fact, three conferences a year are held at the enrollment of 500 in each, so pastors

could come and catch the "hot one" then go home to build a CAMEO church (contemporary attitudes to method evangelism and outreach).

Hybels began a Saturday evening service and now estimates there are 4,000 to 5,000 churches that conduct worship- Saturday night live. Hybels added contemporary ensembles, orchestra and drama - so do his followers. He has a booming church of young adults who only have faint echoes of Christianity, therefore they buy into innovation, relevance, and excellence. He does not use the old hymns, old liturgy, or the old bureaucracy of the busted dreams of Protestants gone by.

The present "hot one" - Willow Creek Community Church - moves toward the future to a contemporary music beat and "how-to-do-it" sermons that are designed to "fix" the broken lives of its hearers.

Here we are in the 90's. Is there an emerging "hot one" that will capture our hearts and be next love of our ecclesiastical life? Will it be the super Sunday school of Second Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, or the worshipful majestic service of the Church on the Way, Van Nuys, California? Some think it will be the New Song Church that is reaching busters in greater Los Angeles. Perhaps it will be a signs and wonders approach of the Vineyard Fellowship, or back to the liturgical worship of Ward Memorial Presbyterian Church of Greater Detroit, Michigan.

Maybe there will never be another "hot one" i.e. another church that will capture a large part of the contemporary heart of American Christians. Maybe we have become too diverse of a nation and sophisticated in our separated methodology to realize there is one super "hot one" out there that can demand our attention. Or maybe, we visited the "hot ones" and realized when we got back home that all of the "whistles and bells" were not really a new form of Christianity, but like our new cars with "whistles and bells" it is not that much better, it is just another new one. Or even, perhaps after coming back from one of the "hot ones", we realize that the people in these churches were no better than the friends that we know at work, who go to the church down the street, or around the corner. Churches come and churches go, but what about the people, are they different?

Perhaps we should not emphasize the place where "the hot ones" are located - that is in a church - let us face the heat where it comes from, i.e. from the Lord and His Word. Then let us become "carriers of the heat" back to our church, our family, and our friends.