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Elmer L. Towns
Liberty University

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Jeff Winstead — Harvest Baptist Church Insight into Rapid Church Growth

by Elmer Towns

When Jeff Winstead graduated from Liberty Baptist Seminary in 1981, he had a vision of planting a large church in Hagerstown, Maryland. The following year *Moody Monthly* reported the Harvest Baptist Church had the fastest-growing Sunday school in the nation with an increase of 952 percent!

What caused the church's rapid expansion? Pastor Winstead gives two primary reasons for the uncommon growth. "First, we realize that we are coworkers in the ministry with the Holy Spirit of God. We know that it takes the Holy Spirit to win people to Christ. Our responsibility is to be filled with the Spirit, then rely on His work to raise up the church."

Secondly, the young pastor makes an effort to involve the men of the new church in soulwinning, often discipling them himself on a one-to-one basis. The effort pays high dividends, as these men are prepared for positions of leadership.

A lot of hard work was involved in putting Winstead's philosophy of church planting into action and in the meantime the church caught their minister's love for souls.

"We visited all day during our first four weeks in Hagerstown," Winstead remembers. Each Tuesday evening the church held "get-acquainted meetings," enjoyable gatherings in which Winstead explained his serious commitment to spreading the gospel and his vision of creating a new church in the Hagerstown area.

"I told the people that I would be personally responsible for winning one per-

son to Christ and having him walk the aisle at the first service," Winstead said. "And I challenged them to make the same commitment to visitation and soulwinning."

On the morning of the first service, the new church had 100 people and an offering of \$1,300. They met at the Trinity Center, voluntarily provided by Jimmy Resh, director of the Rescue Mission.

On September 5, 1981 Harvest Baptist Church held a chartering service. The original 100 members had multiplied to 265. An offering of \$10,000 was collected for the building fund.

Another reason behind the success of the church began during Winstead's final year in seminary—long before the philosophy of his ministry was translated into reality, before his vision of establishing a soulwinning church ever inspired 265 people. Jeff and his wife, Audrey, had dedicated each Wednesday to fasting and prayer.

"After school we went over to the Thomas Road Baptist Church prayer chapel and prayed for our new church. We asked God to prepare a people who were hungry for the preaching of His Word. We asked specifically for a building and the other materials essential to starting the church." At the chartering service the Winsteads realized how God had answered a whole year of prayer and fasting.

They had trusted God's faithfulness for the needs of the church, and He graciously provided their financial needs as well. When they arrived in Hagerstown, the couple had only \$15. At the second "get-acquainted meeting" one of the men suggested an offering should be taken. They gave the Winsteads \$700 that night, thus meeting the pastor's financial needs from the very beginning.



In February 1982, Evangelist Freddy Gage came to the church for a four-day crusade. Pastor Winstead encouraged his people to bring others to church, hoping to exceed their previous attendance high of 421. The first service of the crusade had 521 and the last service had over 1,500 people. During this time 230 people were saved. Average Sunday attendance increased by 100 after the evangelist's visit.

By fall of 1983 Harvest Baptist was averaging 430 each Sunday morning and collecting about \$4,000 weekly. Their annual budget is now \$216,000.

To begin the church's missions program, Pastor Winstead presented Missionary Russ Meritt to his congregation as a worthwhile candidate. Meritt is a missionary to Long Island, New York, and a friend who had been president of the student body at LBS while Winstead served as vice president. Harvest has been able to support Meritt in the amount of \$400 a month almost since the church began.

As always when a new church meets with success, some will take the opportunity to criticize, saying members have been proselytized from other congregations. How does Winstead respond?

"We came into this town with one contact, Mr. Resh. We came to start a church not to reorganize one," said Winstead. The people have gathered because, he says, "it's God's work, God's ministry, and He will have His way with it." Forty percent of the church's members are new converts and about 60 percent are transfer members.

The pastor attributes the strong women's fellowship at Harvest Baptist to his wife. "I believe she is the most godly lady on earth," he says, with no small amount of love and respect in his voice. Mrs. Winstead leads the women's soulwinning efforts by example, utilizing a method undoubtedly like her husband's. Together they have planted one of the fastest-growing churches in the nation, Harvest Baptist Church, in Hagerstown, Maryland. □



Elmer Towns is Dean of Liberty Baptist Seminary and Chairman of the Division of Religion at Liberty Baptist College, Lynchburg, Virginia.