

Touch Your World For Him

The Story of Dominion Church

Houston, Texas – Dominion Church was built from a vision . . . a vision of building something to outlive and outlast itself, and reach future generations for Jesus Christ in a specific area of Houston: Clear Lake. Clear Lake is home to technology, water resort living and the NASA astronauts. Sounds exciting, doesn't it? Even grand, perhaps. But while the vision was God-sized, the beginnings were small, and remained that way longer than anyone could ever have dreamed possible. Planting a church in Clear Lake was both exciting and scary . . . very scary.

Pastors Greg and Deena Thurstonson were the Associate Pastors of Faith Assembly of God in Pasadena, Texas in 1995. They had been married for 10 years and were the parents of two young daughters, one a toddler and the other a 3-year-old with serious medical problems brought on during a complicated premature birth. Though the family was young, they had been serving the Lord in ministry for over a decade, and Pastor Deena had traveled with her parents in her youth, singing and ministering with their musical group.

The two knew God had something more in mind for them, but they didn't yet know what it was. Pastor Greg gives background of what occurred as God started to move on their hearts to plant Dominion Church.

“My wife and I had just seen the movie, *Apollo 13*, on its opening night in Clear Lake. I remember looking across the room and it was filled with all kinds of employees that worked with the Johnson Space Center. I remember just weeping, thinking that if this is what this community can do in the natural, what can God do through their spirit. On that night, unbeknownst to me, God put a seed of destiny in my heart and in my hands called Dominion Church.”

Later, Pastor Greg recounts that as he was headed to preach a youth camp, he felt the impression of the Holy Spirit so strongly it was as if He was sitting in the car beside him.

“I started driving and I was listening to the words of a song by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, which said, “*Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me,*” and I began to weep uncontrollably. It was in that moment that I heard the Holy Spirit speak and say for me to take up the Cross and follow Him to Clear Lake. I knew as the Holy Spirit spoke to me that this was going to be an unusual calling, with an unusual vision and that it would demand an uncommon provision.”

Today, Pastor Greg likes to tell with humor of Pastor Deena's initial reaction, and says, “I remember excitedly pulling over at a hamburger place outside of Houston and calling my wife. I said, ‘Baby, guess what! I know exactly what God wants for us to do now in ministry. We're going to walk away from our positions as Associate Pastor and Worship Leader and we're going to go to Clear Lake, and pioneer a church! We're going to start without a building, without a salary, and without a congregation and we are going to live the dream!’ On the other end of the phone there was dead silence, he said, so he then added, ‘Deena, can you hear me? Can you hear me now?’”

Joking aside, both felt strongly that the church had to be built on the promise in Zechariah 4:6, *“Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord.”*

To Begin You Do . . . What?

It was time to begin, but how? Blessed with a strong administrative gift, Pastor Greg developed a prospectus to present to the board at Faith Assembly of God. After receiving their approval and blessing to begin the new church in Clear Lake with a small core group who shared the same vision, the work began. Out of this empowered and dedicated group came a couple to spiritually oversee Dominion as elders, five businessmen and teachers to serve as a board, and a music director in the person of Deena’s talented mother, Wadine Chamberlain. At the first board meeting, held around a table at a Denny’s off a busy Houston freeway, the first of many of Dominion’s core values was firmly established. The board decided that no matter how little or how much there was financially, the staff salaries would always be paid first and then would come missions. Because for that group of leaders, Pastors Greg and Deena were their missionaries being sent to an un-reached people group in a new community called Clear Lake.

For the next few months, on Sunday mornings, Pastors Greg and Deena led the core group as they visited churches across the Houston area that were similar in vision and style to their own. They networked with other churches, children’s staffs and pastors to build relationships and glean practical insights. They built valuable relationships that are invaluable to this day.

On Sunday evenings, Pastor Greg held training meetings in every conceivable location available. These locations ranged from a small metal building without air conditioning to a Victorian wedding hall. The 20 or so people gathered faithfully for prayer and leadership training on the “nuts and bolts” of planting a church. Everyone carried notebooks and Pastor Greg taught week after week on topics such as how to build greeter and usher ministries, ministering to children and youth, and how to pray and evangelize effectively. It was at one of these meetings at the wedding hall that God miraculously healed the Thurstonsons’ oldest daughter of a very serious health problem. This gave even more momentum and excitement to the vision of becoming a Church of Faith, Hope and Healing in the Clear Lake Area.

But through all of this, one huge problem remained: where to meet. The board, now meeting regularly in one of its members own homes, discussed a variety of options. Dominion Church’s financial income came solely from the tithes and offerings of the core group of parishioners. Property and rental prices in Clear Lake were astronomically high (property started at \$250,000 an acre). The church owned nothing, not even furniture. Pastor Greg and his volunteer administrative assistant handled paperwork from the trunks of their cars, from their home phones and from a home computer.

God kept bringing one possibility to the forefront – a meeting place with an excellent location across the street from NASA and a formidable price tag. But after much prayer and deliberation, the leadership felt that the Nassau Bay Hilton Hotel would indeed present the picture of excellence that Dominion had already worked so hard to achieve in its formative planning stage. The decision to step out in faith was made. Everyone knew it could only work if God faithfully

answered their prayers, and if the congregation, in turn, continued to be faithful in the “small things.”

“Through tough times, we had already learned to ask two questions,” explained Pastor Greg. “What can we afford to do, and secondly, what can we afford not to do?” Out of a compelling passion to reach lost souls, the church decided that it had to take the next step. “Even though we could not afford to financially go, the cost of even one soul perishing said that we could not afford to not go”.

That little core group of people raised over \$5,000 one Sunday night, to purchase a sound system for the first service. Pastor Greg had just preached a passionate sermon called *Two More Yards*, in which he recounted a testimony of a football team that needed only two more yards to cross the goal line. In the case of Dominion, it was two more yards to cross the goal of our starting line, Pastor Greg says today, adding, “It was just a supernatural move of God financially.”

So, on Easter Sunday in 1996, Dominion Church held its first Celebration Service in the Nassau Bay Hilton. The first service attendance was 89, made up of core group members, their families and guests, and one or two curious stragglers from the hotel lobby.

Shout Happens!

The praise and worship, led by Pastor Deena, was incredible, and Pastor Greg’s dynamic and energetic preaching style was appreciated and well-received. In addition to the sound system, the church had purchased two offering plates, and the elders had donated a communion set. Praise team members brought their own instruments along with them to church. Momentum was strong and the belief was that salaries and the \$4,000 a month rent for ongoing meeting and storage space at the Hilton would be met. YEA, GOD! The vision for helping reach those in Clear Lake who did not know Christ was at last going to come to pass.

Pastor Greg, with his usual self-deprecating sense of humor, describes what happened next:

“The next Sunday, attendance was down from 89 to 76. The Sunday after that, it dropped to 49. The followed Sunday it continued to plunge, as it fell even further, down to 32. That Sunday after service, history records, that Pastor Greg told Deena in the car after service that at this rate our church would only last another two or three weeks at the most and that we know hold the dubious title and distinction of pastoring the fastest dying church in America.

But the leadership and the congregation kept their eyes focused on the vision while undertaking the ordinary hard work of weekly setting up hotel meeting rooms from storage. Together as a team, they would convert hotel rooms as best they could into a sanctuary, a children’s room and a nursery.

Gradually, slowly, the membership grew, as did the finances through careful oversight by the leadership and through the committed tithing of the members. Christian Education classes were held periodically on Sunday nights in the hotel, as were classes for new members. The church

conducted imaginative community outreaches, VBS for the children in the summer, and held constant prayer meetings in members' homes.

Everyone still saw the hotel only as a short-term launching pad. The vision was for a thriving, dynamic, ministering, growing church, and for that you needed a building. Right? Well, not exactly, in this case as that is not the way God did it.

Against all odds, Dominion did become a vibrant, ministering, growing work – in a hotel. Property search was ongoing. The church hired a corporate realtor and joined the Chamber of Commerce. Every lead was followed, every effort made, to find the next place for Dominion to go and grow.

Building for Others What We Cannot Build For Ourselves

But it did not happen. The hotel allowed a small office space down on the marina, with non-functioning air and heat, to be rented for \$1,100 a month. The church continued to work, struggle and succeed . . . through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In 1999, Dominion launched a “Touch The World For Him” program to expand what had been from the beginning a strong missions giving commitment. Dominion remained small in size, but still had its God-sized dream. On that one Sunday in August, the church, with only 89 in attendance, pledged \$30,000 to build a missions church in Africa and another one in Mexico. As the buildings went up, the church rejoiced that others were indeed going to be saved. The newest core value at Dominion Church became, “We will build for others what we cannot build for ourselves.” \$30,000 would not have bought the tiniest parcel of land in Clear Lake, but for those in other parts of the world it would give them opportunity to take Dominion through land and buildings.

Again, there was not a dry eye in the House the day the missionary from Sakiim, Chattra Tamang, came and told the congregation how much their ongoing monthly support had meant to him and his church. Chattra said that the people in India were dedicating four hours every Wednesday morning to pray specifically for Dominion Church. He brought some coins for Dominion's building fund from the children in Sakiim. He described how the children had worked 12-hour days scrubbing toilets and cleaning yards for as little as 3 cents an hour, in order to painstakingly earn \$100 to give to Dominion Church for its building fund. It had been apparent all along, but never more so than on that day that being a church was about more than just having a building. (Note on missions: One testimony that also greatly encouraged Dominion around this time came from the Missions Director of the National Assemblies of God in Springfield, when he called to tell the congregation of a job well done – they had become one of the top missions givers for churches their size.)

Like any church, Dominion had its own share of “people problems.” Members periodically moved away, changed jobs, felt Dominion was no longer right for them, etc. God continued to bring in new folks, and the membership remained around 100. Financially, the church remained a miracle – strong and debt-free, as the commitment to tithing and giving stayed firm. But it was

hard on everyone, especially the leadership, to see so much money continue to be spent on rent. The pastors and the property committee continued their constant search.

Growing Despite Ourselves: The Hotel Shuffle

In 2000, the situation worsened when the Hilton began moving Dominion completely off its Sunday meeting room schedule due to an understandable business need to accommodate larger and more lucrative customers. Once again, the only suitable space available was found in another hotel. For the next two years, Dominion was shuffled between the Hilton and the Holiday Inn, a mile down the road. Members would have to call the church office prior to services in order to hear the voice mail recording announce where Dominion was going to be meeting that day.

It wasn't until the summer of 2002 that a shopping center space opened up in another part of the community. It was across the lake and over 5 miles away, but it was still within the target area of the church. So in the fall of 2002, Dominion moved into a leased space of 6,000 square feet with a monthly average price tag of \$7,900. And it began to grow. Being able to remain in one location from week to week, without the headaches of hotel tear-down and set-up helped immensely. The location of a Clear Lake high school across the street fit into the church's vision to reach future generations for Christ. At the shopping center location, a dynamic children's and youth ministry was built, which in turn brought in many young families. Ultimately, it also allowed the church to hire a full-time and much-needed Youth Pastor.

Three years later, at the church's annual business meeting in February, 2005, a bold decision was made and that was to give a large sum of money back to the District. In the early years of Dominion Church, a church within its section had to close. In their Constitution and Bylaws, the Reversionary Clause called for the District to set aside money to go towards establishing a new church. It was at that time that the District set aside a gift of \$100,000 to be used in helping Dominion Church secure property.

Pastor Greg explained, "That God began to speak to our hearts that the \$100,000 was not our harvest but our seed. We believed that the seed held our future, but to see it, we would have to seed it into someone else's soil." At the 2005 business meeting, the congregation voted 44 to 0 to give all \$100,000 to the South Texas District, to be used at the District's Camp where so many youth and children have been touched by the power of the Holy Spirit. This would be invaluable to the vision of "being a part of something that would out live and outlast us" and it would continue to help secure a wonderful Pentecostal heritage and harvest for future generations.

In the fall of 2005, at the end of the three-year shopping center lease, a building was found, close to the Interstate 45 freeway in Houston, which could be considered a possibility. The asking price, however, for building and land was \$1.25 million (plus the cost of a necessary brand-new air conditioner). Typically, the required down payment is 20%, and Dominion did not have it. But as the pastors, leadership and congregation continued to pray and seek God, unexpected blessings began to arrive. Members continued even stronger faithful tithing and giving. Other churches who had worked alongside Dominion over the years, sent gifts of support, saying, "We believe in you, and we believe in your dream."

The strength of Dominion's financial history began opening one door of favor after another, again, because the church had been faithful in the "small things" over the years. The church had paid over \$700,000 in rent between the hotels and the shopping center space, and had not once missed a payment or ever been late.

The building's owner and his wife spent more and more time with Pastors Greg and Deena. As they did, concession after concession was made by them on the church's behalf. The owners, who were Buddhist, did believe in the vision Dominion Church held for the Clear Lake community. They began to want to make it possible for Dominion to purchase the land and the building.

One Sunday the owner visited Dominion while it still met at the shopping center, and observed the people coming and going. As he was watching, he later told Pastor Greg that "he heard the Higher Power tell him that he was supposed to help Dominion." Subsequently, he reduced the starting price to \$1.13 million, and eventually went down to \$832,000. Then he personally, along with his business partner, dropped off a check for \$10,000, and purchased a new air conditioning unit for the church!

The Next Generation Moves Into Its Place

It was all above and beyond the abilities of Dominion's leaders and members in the natural... It was, simply put, a "God Thing." Today the church averages 350 in attendance on Sundays and over 200 on Wednesdays in its new facility. The support for home and foreign missions continues to grow stronger, as does the commitment to love people one at a time.

The vision today, 10 years later, remains pretty much the same as does the story of looking for a home... as the current building and property are now at maximum capacity, and the property search continues. The leadership believes that the current "not so permanent" building will eventually become the facility used solely for children's and youth ministries. A place where Dominion's next generation will grow and take their place in the Kingdom.

For 10 years, Dominion has fought an uphill battle of property search, hotel shuffles, and, like any church, endless obstacles in the natural realm. But as a true "Decade of the Harvest" church, Dominion's pastors and leaders have had the tenacity and commitment to wait for their harvest. The seeds that were planted so many years ago, are now beginning to grow into the Harvest that God promised was in the ground when in 1996, Pastor Greg first heard the Holy Spirit say, "take up the Cross and Follow Me to Clear Lake".

Isaiah 61:7 says... "Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs."

May this be the year that your ministry soil sees and reaps "double for your trouble".

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