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1

THE CHURCH THAT REVIVAL BUILT

ON MAY 26, 1971, seventeen-year-old Jeannie Allen walked quietly to the microphone in a small Baptist church in Rives Junction, Michigan. For the past ten days the church had experienced an unusual spiritual awakening under the ministry of the Italian twins, Ralph and Lou Sutera. When Jeannie stood up to speak, the exhilaration that swept the audience could almost be felt. And with good reason: Jeannie was regarded as a leader among the young people of the church. Yet, she was bitter, selfish, and rebellious. She had come to the meetings determined to "hold out" and blatantly let it be known that she saw no valid reason why she should surrender her life to Christ. Her avowed goal in life was to be popular, and she didn't intend to have anything mar the plans she had for herself.

But one night she had gone to a "share-in" following the evening service. Some of the people present shared what God had done in their lives; others asked for special prayer so that they too might be restored to fellowship with God. Jeannie had determined to sit through it all unmoved. But finally, at 2:00 A.M., she could no longer resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit. She yielded her life totally to God.

Now she stood before a packed church. "I could hardly wait to come to church tonight," she began. "The reason I'm here is because of what has happened to the adults of this

church. Before this week, I saw nothing in their lives worth having. But when they met God, I wanted what they had."

Jeannie then spoke of the struggle of the past few days: "I thought I had to give up too much. I had only one life, so I really wanted to live. But, before I met God, I didn't know what living was!"

Her testimony reflected the experience of many in the Rives Baptist Church. Believers who thought they were alive spiritually had just made a startling discovery: they did not know what living was! But they learned. And how!

Rives Junction is a small town of approximately 250 people in the state of Michigan. (It might not be on your map, but it is located ten miles north of Jackson.) When my wife and I drove through it, we met only two cars. In fact, it doesn't even have a stoplight. The town has been appropriately called "an interlude between two cornfields." Yet, the events that unfolded there in the spring of 1971 are a remarkable chapter in the history of the phenomenon that is often called *revival*.

A CANCELLATION BECOMES GOD'S APPOINTMENT

Here is the story. A few months before the Suterases came, the church had experienced a bitter split. One hundred people left to form a new congregation. The Reverend Robert A. Mains, a missionary who had returned to the United States from the West Indies, was asked to be the interim pastor of the congregation that remained. His goal was to "take what there was left and hold it together." His job was not easy.

The 170 remaining members were discouraged and pessimistic. Some predicted the church would close its doors in six months. Even the most optimistic visualized years of struggle ahead.

Mains had met the twins, Ralph and Lou Sutura, when he was a missionary in the West Indies. The Suterases had been invited there for evangelistic meetings, and Mains was im-

pressed with their ministry. But Mains had not kept in contact with the twins, and when he returned to the United States, he had no clue to their whereabouts. Much to his surprise, he met them unexpectedly at Three Rivers, Michigan, on January 10, 1971. That evening, the Suterases invited him to a coffee fellowship following the evening service. When Mains observed the atmosphere of openness among the people, he commented, "Rives Junction needs this." After the meeting he invited the Suterases to come to his church.

Much to his disappointment they declined. Their schedule was already crammed for the next two years. Mains replied, "I'm going to pray for a cancellation and will call you later this week."

Three days later, Mains phoned the Suterases. They told him that a series of meetings had just been cancelled—they would come to Rives Junction for two weeks! Mains was delighted with the news, but his congregation did not share his enthusiasm. They didn't even know who the Suterases were.

When the meetings began on May 16, 1971, most of the church members were apathetic. The farmers were busy planting their corn and townspeople complained about the burden of more meetings. After the first service on Sunday, many criticized the length of the sermon. (The Suterases have never been known to preach brief messages.) Some people vowed they would not return.

THE IMPACT OF CHANGED LIVES

Approximately seventy attended on Monday evening, and perhaps a few more on Tuesday. Obviously, the people were not in the mood for a revival. But Tuesday's meeting was different from any the people had ever experienced. Several couples had come from the town of Monroe, Michigan, to share what God had done in their lives during a crusade one year before. One couple told how God had rescued their marriage from divorce; another shared how God had freed

them from bitterness and how they were now able to witness to others.

That evening a sharing session was held in a home following the evening service. The couples from Monroe explained more fully how God had met the deepest needs of their hearts. The people at Rives Junction were impressed but were still unprepared to commit themselves fully to God.

On Thursday evening, the Suterases played a tape of additional testimonies of revived believers from Monroe. When Ralph asked what the people thought of these testimonies, one woman responded, "I don't know about all of you, but I don't have that kind of joy. Maybe it doesn't happen to Baptists!"

The woman's response began the revival. Almost immediately others began to share their spiritual needs. The format of the meeting was flexible. Those who had something to share about what God had done in their lives were free to do so. Others who had needs would request special prayer. One couple admitted, "We've been married for five years; we quarrel almost every day." They knelt as others prayed for them; they repented of their selfishness, anger, and pride. The change in their lives was immediate. Later they gave each other new wedding bands as a reminder of the "new" marriage God had given them.

Like dominoes, one person after another confessed his or her need. As the "share-ins" continued night after night, even the most "devout" could no longer fake the commitment to God they had pretended to possess. Reality and honesty won the day.

Chairs were placed in a circle with one chair in the middle. The individual who shared a need knelt in the center while others prayed. Some on the outer circle soon discovered that they could not pray for others; they had to confess their own sins to God first, or, in some instances, had to go to others to ask forgiveness.

A woman who had been too shy to use the telephone now prayed freely with others. An alcoholic whose wife did not return home at the usual time on Sunday (the morning service lasted till 3:00 P.M.) drove to the church to find out what had happened to his wife. They met each other on the road. She was afraid he might be angry with her. Instead, he was delighted to see her; he thought the rapture might have come! Later he was converted.

Another man, bitter over the church split, began to attend only because of the drastic change he had seen in the life of his son and daughter-in-law. God took him apart piece by piece. When he realized how many people he had wronged, he knew he would have to ask their forgiveness. "I have a lot of people to see," he told the pastor. "It will take about two weeks before I will be fully right with God." He was wrong. It took longer.

The trickle became a stream, a river, then a flood. The Christian radio station WUNN interviewed those who participated in the revival. Scores of people called in to tell what God was doing. By the next week, attendance shot up to 900 in a church with a seating capacity of 300. As Mains explained, "We put chairs where chairs had never been before." The aisles and hallways were jammed; more than fifty people were sandwiched into the nursery. People came as early as 5:00 P.M. to get a good seat. The farmers, who had not planned to attend, were bombarded with reports on what was happening. They left their tractors idle in the field and came to the meetings. In some cases, their tractors were idle even during the day, and their corn was planted later. Some people were under such deep conviction that they could not wait for the evening service to commit themselves to God. So people met in homes to pray for each other.

The "share-ins" continued each night after the evening services. As one after another told what God had done in their lives, those who sensed their own need would leave the

meeting to surrender themselves to God. After prayer and counsel, they returned to share how God had met them. Such conviction and activity continued for hours. Said one man, "I have finally surrendered the weapons of a rebel."

On three occasions, the afterglows continued all night. One couple who had decided beforehand to leave at midnight was among the forty persons that watched a sunrise. Another couple wisely brought sleeping bags for their children, so that they (the parents) would be able to stay "for the end of the meeting." (They had determined to stay to the end before but had left at 3:00 A.M.). Mains' son Nathan, who committed his life to God during the meetings, recalls going directly from the meeting to his home for breakfast and then off to school at 9:00 A.M.

No one had been obligated to stay so late. In fact, people left when they wished. But there was an insatiable desire to be where God was at work and not to miss anything. "This," quipped a teenager, "is nightlife at its best. It's a *Gospel* nightlife."

The impact of the revival reverberated throughout the community. In school, rebellious teenagers so feared the prayers of the "revived" teenagers that they urged, "Don't pray for us"—knowing that such prayers would probably be answered. David Phelps, a fifteen-year-old student from Jackson, gave a report on the revival for his English class. Speaking of a particular situation, he said in part,

This revival has saved a marriage and has caused many people to discover the reality of God. Revival is occurring in my own heart. I am one that has found how real God can be in my life. I have always felt there was a God, but seeing Him change the lives of many people has reinforced my faith in the power and existence of God.

(Incidentally, his teacher gave him an A+ for his report).

One striking feature of the revival was the dramatic change

in the attitude of the people. Marriages were saved; estranged children were reconciled with their parents; harsh, judgmental spirits were exchanged for love. "Before," said Mains, "all that some people could see when they looked at young people was their long hair and jeans. That's *all* they could see. Now people saw each other in genuine love."

The largest service of the eighteen-day crusade was on Memorial Day. The nearby Youth Haven Ranch combined their rally with the revival crusade. Fifteen-hundred people gathered for an outdoor service. This large, enthusiastic crowd was a remarkable contrast to the first meeting of the crusade just two-and-a-half weeks before.

Mel Johnson of *Tips For Teens*, who had attended one of the services, was optimistic about the future impact of the revival. He also noted that such an event would not go unnoticed in the demon world. He suggested that "the devil was calling an emergency meeting of his cabinet." No one could doubt that Satan's stronghold in human hearts had been toppled by the Spirit of God. Mel also shared a definition of revival which he had heard: "Revival is God's finger pointed at *me*!" That poignant remark was later widely used by the Suterases to stress that revival is intensely personal.

Mains, who has read many books on revivals of the past, says, "I've never read anything that exceeded what I saw here at Rives Junction." Of course, many revivals have been broader in scope; sometimes an entire country has been affected by an unusual moving of God's Spirit. But, evaluated from the standpoint of conviction of sin, repentance, and restitution, this revival bore remarkable parallels to the great revivals of the past. No one could doubt that God had been at work.

DOES IT LAST?

The foregoing events all happened in May 1971. What has happened since then?

Since Mains was expected to be at the church only temporarily, the church called the Reverend Allan Jennex of California to be their pastor. In fact, he had already accepted their invitation *before* the Sutera crusade started. He knew the situation well; he had been pastor at Rives Junction six years before. During the revival he received numerous phone calls and letters from those who knew him, sharing what God had done. By the time Jennex arrived in July, the church, spiritually speaking, was ablaze. He remarked, "Rather than having to prod my people to witness, I feel as if I have a team of broncos and my hands are full just hanging on to the reins."

As the news spread, the church received requests for lay teams to share what God had done. There were more than enough volunteers. Scores of lay teams fanned into surrounding churches. For example, during the first week of December 1971, Mains reported that seventy members of the church, comprising nine teams, were sharing "revival" in different areas. Almost every meeting resulted in other believers surrendering themselves fully to God. Many others accepted Christ as Saviour. In all, nearly twenty churches experienced their own revival, though on a smaller scale. Some pastors who had been seeking for an honorable exit from the ministry renewed their commitment to God. They confessed their spiritual coldness to their congregations and asked for prayer. There was an outpouring of love and restitution.

Meanwhile, at Rives Junction Church, attendance increased so dramatically that soon after the revival the congregation voted to build a new church. Jennex affirmed that the primary reason for the new church is the "growing commitment of youth." As many as one hundred teenagers attended the services each Sunday. The revival obliterated the so-called generation gap.

Thirty acres of farmland were bought one mile from the town of Rives Junction. The church was built with the op-

timism of people who believe that no miracle is too big for God. The sanctuary seats 600 comfortably, with additional space for another 300 if needed. A master plan calls for a seating capacity of 1,300. "We don't know what God wants to do," explained Jennex, "but we want to be prepared."

In 1975, attendance averaged 370 on Sunday morning (more than double their 1971 statistics), 200 on Sunday evening, and 125 at prayer meeting. The church budget has tripled since 1971. But neither the congregation nor the church staff is satisfied; they find it hard to be content with the status quo now that they've had a taste of what God can do. To quote Jennex, "Never before were we willing to step out in faith and trust God to do what must be done."

The new \$750,000 structure, situated in the middle of the cornfields near Rives Junction, is a testimony of what God can do in the lives of those who are willing to pay any price to have God's blessing. One of the obvious characteristics of the church is a contagious spirit of evangelism. The growth of the church is evidence that a steady stream of people are being introduced to Jesus Christ. Bible study groups, coffee fellowships, and lay sharing are still flourishing.

The church, which in 1971 could hardly support a full-time pastor, now has a full-time staff of three. At the invitation of the church, Reverend Mains has continued as associate pastor.

What about those who committed their lives to Christ back in 1971? What about Jeannie Allen for instance? It was her testimony that had a profound effect on the young people of the church. On September 24, 1975, she shared publicly what had happened during the past four years. "God has put me in many difficult situations" she explains, "because I know He is preparing me for something greater." Then looking back to the revival of four years earlier, she continued, "That

decision isn't something that took care of my life from now to eternity. I've had to learn that I can't expect the Lord to lead me if I'm not in the Word and with Him in prayer by myself."

Her testimony underscores two significant points: first, the decision she made during the revival changed the direction of her life; second, any commitment to God, no matter how genuine, is only the beginning of a life of faith. No experience of today guarantees spiritual depth for tomorrow. But, as countless Christians discovered, before the revival they had not even begun to take the demands of discipleship seriously. Revival was just the beginning; but, thank God, hundreds of people did begin!

Did it last? More than two years after the revival Jennex, in an article in the *Leslie Local Independent*, evaluated the effects of what happened: "Some revivals only stir feathers; and when the speakers go, the feathers settle where they were. This one was not simply another meeting. It was a true revival." Today, he is still convinced of those words.

When my wife and I drove to Rives Junction in 1975, we were fascinated to find the large and beautiful church quite literally in the middle of nowhere. "What's this church doing out here?" my wife asked. Her question was an echo of the thought in my own mind. After touring the facilities, we made an inescapable conclusion: we were in the church that revival built.

A TURNING POINT

Rives Junction was so named because it was the junction between two railway lines. For the Sutera twins, Rives was a junction of a different sort. From now on, their ministry would take a new direction. For one thing, it was here that they met Dr. Virgil Brock, author of the song "Beyond the

Sunset." Though he was eighty-five years old, he joined their team and traveled with them for the next four years.¹

Rives also represented another turning point: God was teaching the Suterases that they had to be open to the possibility that He might want them to change their schedules. The two-week crusades of the past would have to be open-ended, giving more time to churches that were ripe for revival. God had already moved unexpectedly in Abbotsford, British Columbia. And now the Sutura team was convinced that they had to be ready for greater things.

They were not disappointed. In the fall of the same year a crusade was scheduled in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. They did not know—nor could anyone have predicted—what would happen after they arrived. But God was already at work in Canada preparing the way for an unusual moving of the Holy Spirit. What God did out in the cornfields of Michigan, He would now do among the wheatfields of the Canadian prairies.

Read on.

1. The song "Beyond the Sunset" was written in 1936 by Dr. Brock after he and a group of friends viewed a beautiful sunset near Winona Lake, Indiana. A blind friend who was with them remarked, "I've never seen a more beautiful sunset than this one!" Dr. Brock was curious to know how a blind person could make such a remark. The blind man explained, "I can see beyond the sunset!" The words inspired Dr. Brock, and the song was written that evening.