

DEEP
&
WIDE

*Creating Churches Unchurched People
Love to Attend*

ANDY STANLEY

section one

MY STORY

Starting Up and
Starting Over

chapter one

NOT ALL THAT DEEP

My earliest memory of church was my dad baptizing me when I was six. I still remember what he said: “A pastor has no greater privilege than to baptize his own children.”

He was right.

I’ve baptized all three of mine.

As a preacher’s kid, there was never a time in my life that I was not involved in church. And unlike a lot of PKs, I don’t remember ever being forced to go. I liked it. Church was always the center of my social life. It’s where I made lifelong friends, several of whom I’m still connected with today.

My parents began their ministry together in 1957 in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. After graduating from seminary, my dad accepted a call to pastor Fruitland Baptist Church. In addition to pastoring the church, he was invited to teach at the Fruitland Baptist Bible Institute, located directly across the parking lot from the church. FBBI was established in 1946 to assist local pastors who lacked the opportunity or means for theological training. So there he was, all of twenty-four years old, teaching men almost twice

his age who had been pastoring for years but who lacked formal training. And he loved it.

Fortunately for me, there was no hospital in Fruitland. Equally fortunate was the fact that my mom did not want to deliver me at home. So technically I'm not from Fruitland. I was born right around the corner in Hendersonville.

From Fruitland we moved to Fairborn, Ohio, where my sister was born. Then my dad accepted a call to First Baptist Church of Miami, Florida. We lived in Miami seven years before transitioning to First Baptist Church of Bartow, forty miles east of Tampa, Florida. We were there only fifteen months when a friend called and asked my dad to pray about coming to First Baptist Church of Atlanta as the senior associate pastor. He wasn't the least bit interested. We loved Bartow. But he assured Felix that he would pray about it, hoping Felix wouldn't call back. But he did. And he kept calling. And apparently so did God.

In 1969, our family moved to Atlanta. It was a rough transition. Miami and Bartow were paradise by comparison. The church in Atlanta wasn't healthy. But, of course, nobody tells you that in an interview process. Maybe they didn't know. The other thing they didn't bother to tell him was that no one knew where the key to his desk was.

Two years after we moved to Atlanta, the deacons asked the senior pastor to step down. Which he did. Then they made the mistake of asking my dad to fill the pulpit while they put together a pastor search committee to begin looking for a replacement. As you may know, my dad knows a thing or two about preaching. It wasn't long before the church began to grow. This was a bit disturbing to the power brokers. They didn't feel like my dad was qualified to be senior pastor because of his age, education, and his

irritating propensity to preach about sin, repentance, and personal salvation. Imagine such a thing. It wasn't long before they decided my dad would need to step down. But that was going to be tricky. The church was experiencing new life. The new members class was full. The baptistery was being used every Sunday night. Offerings were increasing.

Clearly, he was not the man for the job.

In spite of all the good things going on, they put pressure on him to resign. It was subtle at first. They explained how difficult it would be for the church to find the "right" man as long as he was around. Promises were made. Severance was assured. Favorable letters would be written. They assumed he would go quietly, like the pastors before him. But my dad was cut from a different cloth than the other guys. As I'll explain in more detail in chapter two, he grew up in an atmosphere where the only predictable and unchanging component was the sovereignty of God. Discovering and doing God's will was everything. Everything. It was that interminable drive that brought order to the chaos of his childhood. So he was not about to let a group of deacons rewrite his life script. He believed then, as he does today, that decisions should be made on your knees. Not in a deacons' meeting. So after each encounter with the power brokers, he would respond by saying, "Let me go home and pray about it."

They had no category for such a thing. In time, the tone of those meetings changed. I can remember him comparing deacons' meetings to the lions' den. As he tells it, "In those days, when I would look around at circumstances, everything said, 'Go.' But on my knees, I sensed God saying, 'You came here out of obedience to me. I'll let you know when it's time to leave.'"

When it became apparent that he wasn't going to take his cue from the board of deacons, things got really ugly. What began as subtle hints turned into not-so-subtle threats. He was told that if he didn't resign he would never work in a Southern Baptist church again. We received nasty anonymous letters at home. In my little book, *Louder Than Words*,² I recount the details of the night a board member actually punched my father in the face during a business meeting. That "turn the other cheek" thing took on a whole new meaning. But sitting in the third row as an eighth-grade boy who idolized his father, I wanted to kill the guy.

As my parents agonized over whether to stay, what they could not appreciate was the impact their example was having on their children. These events took place over forty years ago, but I can remember them like it was yesterday. I can remember our family gathering around our glossy pecan coffee table in the den to pray for direction. I can see the face of the man who hit my dad. I remember where I was standing and what I was thinking. I remember hating the men who wanted to hurt my father. But what impacted me most was my parents' courage—their willingness to do the right thing even when it was hard, even when it cost them, even when they didn't know the full extent of the cost.

At thirteen, I saw firsthand that the local church was a big deal. It was worth fighting for. It was worth risk, sacrifice, and even physical pain. I saw my dad turn the other cheek, but he never turned tail and ran. He did the right thing. He obeyed God and God honored it. What I could not have known at the time, however, was that twenty-four years later, it would be the confidence I saw in him then that would give me the confidence I needed to make the most difficult decision of my life.

CHURCH WARS

My dad's transition from *associate* to *senior* pastor happened during a church business meeting called for the express purpose of forcing him to resign. My parents knew going into the meeting that they might come out unemployed and unemployable. Due to the hostile nature of the gathering, they gave me strict instructions to stay in my father's office until the meeting was over.

Fortunately for me, I had a friend who worked overtime that night to ensure I had a blow-by-blow description of everything taking place in the sanctuary. You know him as Louie Giglio. Back then everybody called him Butch. Louie snuck into the empty baptistery to listen, and then would sneak back to my father's office to report what was going on. The meeting lasted over three hours. There were close to two thousand people in attendance. Person after person came forward with stories of how my father's presence had hurt the church and how his continued involvement would impede the process of finding a new and qualified senior pastor.

In the end, a vote was taken to determine whether my father would be allowed to remain in his position as associate pastor. An overwhelming majority voted to keep him. And then something happened that took the opposition completely by surprise. Someone made a motion to elect my father senior pastor. The chairman of the deacons, who was officiating the meeting, rushed to the microphone and moved that the meeting be adjourned immediately! One of his friends seconded the motion. But unfortunately for them, a gentleman by the name of Henry Robert III was in the audience that night. Henry is the grandson of the late General Henry M. Robert, who wrote *Robert's Rules of Order*. As you may know, *Robert's Rules of Order* is the

“playbook” for parliamentary procedure, the final word in how to conduct an official meeting of just about any type. Since it had been decided ahead of time that all official church business would be conducted according to this standard, Henry felt compelled to come forward and inform the chairman of the deacons that he could not adjourn the meeting while a motion was still under consideration.

Well, things became a bit chaotic at First Baptist Church that night. But in the end, they decided to follow the rules, allow for the motion, and vote. The chairman of the deacons called for a private ballot. Someone else moved that the vote be taken by a public show of hands. So they had to vote on how to take the vote. You’ve got to love that. By this time, the power brokers saw the handwriting on the wall. Actually, they saw the hands waving in the air. When the meeting ended, my dad was senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta. But by the time my parents made it back to my father’s office to give me the good news, it was old news. Thanks to Louie.

WAITIN’ FOR THE CALL

The church continued to grow rapidly. Meanwhile I finished high school and enrolled at Georgia State University where I (eventually) received a degree in journalism. It was during the first semester of my junior year in college that I decided to pursue vocational ministry. All my life I had heard about being “called” into ministry. Several of my friends felt God’s “call” on their lives. They would go forward after church on Sunday nights and pray with my dad. Then, at the conclusion of the service, he would introduce them to the congregation and announce that God had called them

into the ministry. People would clap and come by and congratulate them after the closing song. Many of those guys still serve as pastors, missionaries, parachurch ministry leaders, and seminary professors.

But as for me, I never felt “the call.” I sure tried to feel it. But for whatever reason, it just never happened for me.

So one afternoon as my dad and I were driving somewhere, I asked him, “Dad, does a person have to be ‘called’ into ministry, or can he just volunteer?” He thought for a minute. “I guess it’s okay to just volunteer.” So I told him that I would like to volunteer. He seemed pleased. And that was that. For a long time I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t want the added pressure. And I knew it might limit my options relationally, if you know what I mean.

After college, I headed straight to Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) where I received my Master of Theology (ThM) degree. I loved seminary. I was at DTS during the years of Charles Ryrie, Dwight Pentecost, Howard Hendricks, and Norm Geisler. I remember my dad attending an evening class with me. In the middle of a lecture by Dr. Ryrie, he turned to me and said, “You have no idea how lucky you are to sit under this kind of teaching.” During the break, Dr. Ryrie asked my dad if he would like to address the class. I still remember his answer, “Absolutely not! I’m learning too much.”

While finishing my final semester at DTS, I applied to Baylor University to pursue a PhD in religion. I was denied. Ouch. And while the rejection certainly resurfaced unhealed wounds from a particular middle school dance, I didn’t have time to wallow in my sorrow. If I wasn’t going back to school, I needed to get a job. As it turned out, the director of student ministry who had been serving at my dad’s

church had resigned six months earlier. When the education director heard I was looking for meaningful employment, he called and asked if I would be interested in filling in while they searched for a permanent replacement. In spite of the fact that the whole *serve-until-we-find-the-real-guy* thing had turned out to be a nightmare for my dad, I accepted. After all, as my friend and mentor Charlie Renfroe is fond of saying, “Everybody needs to eat and live indoors.”

What began as a summer job turned into a ten-year gig. I’m not sure when they stopped looking for that “other guy.” All I know is that I fell in love with student ministry. I could not imagine doing anything else. Along with my normal responsibilities, I had the opportunity to preach when my dad was away. Honestly, I don’t know how the people at First Baptist Church of Atlanta took me seriously. The building still bore the scars of my adolescence. But folks were gracious. They always had nice things to say. In exchange, I would let ’em out on time.

It was during my student ministry days that I met Sandra. She was a student at Georgia Tech. We were introduced at a campus Bible study on the Tech campus. How appropriate. Actually, I don’t remember meeting Sandra that night. I was filling in for the regular teacher. The faculty sponsor, a friend of mine, had invited me to fill the open slot. The day after the study, he called me and asked if I remembered meeting a girl named Sandra Walker. I told him that I remembered meeting two girls. Both blonde. He assured me that one of them was Sandra. Then he insisted that I call her and ask her out. I thought that was tacky. So I declined. Gary hounded me. Finally I relented and called the number he had given me. By the time I finally called, Sandra had changed dorms. Not to be deterred, Gary tracked down her

new number. I called. We went out. And we've been going out ever since. We were married on August 6, 1988.

FUTURE TALK

During my student ministry days, people would often ask what I saw in my future; how long did I plan to work with “young people”? My favorite was, “Andy, when are you going to get your own church?” My response to those questions was always the same. “God has given my father an extraordinary platform. I’m here to serve him and help him finish well.” And that was the truth. I had no ambition beyond what I was doing. I loved my job. I loved my church. And once my dad began televising my sermons, I was able to preach to more people on a single Sunday than I would preach to in twenty years at the average church. Why would I go anywhere else? Where else would I possibly want to go?

RELOCATING

In 1987, faced with limited space and aging facilities, First Baptist Atlanta voted to relocate from downtown Atlanta to the suburbs.

While seeking a buyer for our downtown property, the church purchased an Avon Products packing facility north of town. Along with the fifty acres of land, there was about four hundred thousand feet of warehouse space. Within a year of making the decision to move, a European group signed a contract to purchase the downtown property. Realizing that even with a buyer it would be a couple of years before the church could build on the new site and relocate, the deacons asked me if I would be willing to begin holding services in

a portion of our newly acquired warehouse complex. Their rationale was that it would relieve crowding downtown as well as establish a presence on our future sight.

At the meeting when I was asked to take on this new responsibility, the chairman of the deacons kept apologizing for how scaled down everything would be. There wouldn't be a choir or an orchestra. He wanted to know if I would be okay using a band until we could develop space more suited to a traditional worship environment. It was important to them that I understood what I was getting myself into. As one gentleman put it, "It probably won't feel much like church." And, of course, all I could think of was Brer Rabbit. "Please don't throw me in the briar patch!" So I kept a straight face and told them I was willing to take one for the team.

It's important to keep in mind that there were no multi-site churches in those days. A few churches were experimenting with the idea of a second campus, but even that was novel. This was new territory. We had no idea what we were doing, but we could not have been more excited. There were seven of us assigned to the start-up team. Included in that original group were Julie Arnold, Lane Jones, Rick Holliday, Bill Willits, and Reggie Joiner. It was an all-star team. But we didn't know it at the time. Why they chose us, I'll never know. My guess is we were considered nonessential personnel at the downtown location. So they sent us to the badlands to establish an outpost. We were giddy.

My dad and his team took a tremendous chance empowering us the way they did. They put their reputations in our hands. To their credit, they funded the project without micromanaging it. They told us to reach our new community and then gave us complete freedom to dream, design, and

create. So we did. And while we didn't know exactly what we were doing, we knew what we didn't want to do. We didn't want to re-create environments designed for church people. We wanted to create a church that unchurched people would love to attend. We didn't know if that was possible. Actually, we were told it had been tried and that it *wasn't* possible in the over-churched South. But we believed it was worth a shot. So we set out to capture the imaginations and, ultimately, the hearts of unchurched people in that community.

The section of warehouse we commandeered for our worship center accommodated eight hundred people. There were no hallways or lobbies. You walked into the worship center from outside. We built a small stage flanked by green painters' scaffolding to support our PA speakers. The floor was concrete and maintained whatever the temperature was outside. The children's area (area, not classrooms) was another renovated warehouse space accessed through another set of doors from the outside. The children's area had fans, no air conditioning.

The environment was raw, to say the least. And the entire complex was butt ugly.

We opened Easter Sunday 1992 with about seven hundred people, most of whom were from the downtown church. Once they realized that "warehouse worship" was going to be a total departure from what they were accustomed to, about half of them elected not to come back. But they were quickly replaced by people from the community. A lot of people. By the third week, we were turning people away. We were turning away so many cars that a committee from another church in the area asked us if they could stand at the entrances to our parking lots and pass out flyers advertising their church to the people who couldn't get into our services.

We added a second service and began developing overflow space. By the end of the second month, we were closing in on two thousand adults in worship. It was crazy.

While God was using us to transform the way people thought about the local church, a transformation was taking place in our hearts as well. To borrow a phrase from my hero and friend, Bill Hybels, *we were ruined*. There was no going back. This was church as we had never experienced church. Truth is, I was ruined on opening day. After my first message, Sandra and I were walking back to the construction trailer that served as our green room. Just as we reached the rickety wooden stairs, I turned to her with tears in my eyes and said, “That’s what I want to do for the rest of my life.” (Dang it. I got misty just typing that.)

But it wasn’t just me. We all felt that way. It’s no surprise that five of us from that original team are still working together. And if Reggie Joiner hadn’t gotten so busy helping churches all over the country rethink their children’s and student ministry cultures, he might still be with us as well. We were all ruined. We loved the environment. We loved the informality. We loved the freedom it gave us to communicate in creative ways. We loved how disarming our raw warehouse space was for those who considered themselves returners and seekers. The freedom of expression we take for granted now didn’t exist then. This was new. And we couldn’t get enough of it.

STORM WARNING

Meanwhile, things downtown weren’t going so well. The sale of the property fell through. The buyer walked away six months before closing and there was no backup contract.

To complicate matters further, the economy took a turn for the worse and property values in Atlanta plummeted. It became painfully obvious that what the church assumed they could get for the property was way out of line with current economic reality. So what began as a two-year transition turned into an indefinite period of waiting. More time meant more opportunity for the two campuses to develop different and contrasting identities. It wasn't intentional. Even with what I know now, I'm not sure it could have been avoided.

Families that had been attending downtown, but who lived south of the city and were not planning to make the transition to the new campus, began looking for new church homes. Instead of waiting for the actual relocation to take place, they went ahead and transitioned to other churches. The first to go were singles and young families with children. Seemingly overnight, the downtown congregation felt older. In contrast, the North campus was attracting singles and young families by the hundreds. Before long, attendance tilted in our direction.

As I mentioned earlier, our worship styles differed dramatically. So we were perceived as having a "cool" factor that the downtown church lacked. Suits, ties, and skirts became increasingly rare. The explosive growth at the North campus created an exhilarating level of excitement and anticipation, whereas the people downtown felt as if they were "stuck down there" until the property sold.

Eventually, people began to compare and contrast. The we/they talk began. Things became competitive. It was old versus new, traditional versus contemporary. We couldn't understand why the mother church was so reluctant to fund all our new initiatives. And the mother church couldn't

understand why, with our large attendance, we couldn't pay our own way. But in spite of all that, we managed to function as one church in two locations. This was due in large part to the fact that my father and I refused to allow anyone to get between us. We had no tolerance for father versus son. We knew that as long as we were on the same page, we could hold out until the two congregations came back together on the new property.

But in June of 1993, something happened that would ultimately drive a wedge between us. My mom filed for divorce.

ZONDERVAN

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