

An Unexpected Journey

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By Shirley West

BIG SANDY, Texas—Sometimes God takes us on an unexpected journey. This happened to me and my husband, Ben, in 1997.

That year, gas prices were so high that brethren who lived in far western Oklahoma and those living in the eastern part of the Texas Panhandle could not afford to attend church services (in Oklahoma City, Okla., or Amarillo, Texas) except for Passover and the holy days.

House church

Our Oklahoma City pastor came to visit us in our hometown of Sayre, Okla.—which is located halfway between Oklahoma City and Amarillo on Interstate 40 and the famed Highway 66. The pastor was an old friend because he had been our pastor when we lived in Amarillo.

He asked us if we would be willing to have a house church in our home. This came as a big surprise because we lived in a small home with one bedroom and a combined living room and kitchen. Also, Ben had been in this pastor's Spokesman Club and he knew that Ben was not a public speaker.

He said our services could be more like an interactive Bible study with everyone participating. He was concerned that the brethren did not have the opportunity of associating with fellow church members.

After he prayed with us, we said we would give it a try. The pastor said he would notify brethren who lived within a 50-mile radius because they could afford to drive that distance every Sabbath.

Our first service

We had our first service on the last Saturday of November 1997. Those attending were a farm family of four from Shamrock, Texas, and two ladies from Elk City, Okla. The young man from Shamrock was well versed in the Bible and a good speaker. So Ben selected him to give the Bible study.

The Oklahoma City associate pastor and the Oklahoma City church band came to our first service to give us a good start. The mayor of Sayre (a family friend and a Baptist) came and asked God's blessing on our endeavor. The service was mostly prayer and beautiful music that was enjoyed by the neighbors.

The first service also provided us with the opportunity to make plans for how to move forward. Since many of those attending would be farmers, we decid-

ed to have services from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. each Sabbath—so farmers could do their morning chores without having to rush to church. We would also have a potluck meal so no one would have to go home hungry.

Fixtures in community

Ben and I were well known in Sayre. He had grown up in town, and I grew up in a nearby farming community. He was the town's handyman, and I worked for the weekly newspaper.

Soon the word spread that we were having church on Saturday in our home. Many friends came—some out of curiosity and others interested in learning more about the Sabbath and our congregation.

Larger house

By the summer of 1998, we had 18 people attending regularly, and our small home could not hold any more. Some neighbor friends who attended occasionally told us they had a four-room rent house that we could use for a church if we would pay the utilities and mow the lawn.

We were thrilled and prepared the house for services. We put up a sign out front that read: "Circle of Love Fellowship; Services 2:00–4:00 p.m. every Saturday."

Sayre had its first Sabbath-keeping church.

Moved to a building

By the year 2000, we had outgrown the house, and we inquired about an empty Assembly of God building next to the courthouse downtown. The owners said we could have the building—which we cleaned, put in new plumbing and sectioned off a kitchen.

I had been hired to take care of the nursery at the Methodist church, and my salary paid the bills for our new building. We had our first service there on the first Sabbath in March.

Church of the community

As with most congregations, we found opportunities to serve the community. The National Day of Prayer was held at the flagpole beside the courthouse, which was located in front of our church.

One year we provided lunch for those attending, and it became a tradition the four years we were at that location. The service project that day also spawned people in the community calling us the "church of the community."

We were reminded that it was not only our mission to serve God but also to serve the community.

Sharing memories

Following are some memories of special times during our four years in the downtown area.

- In November 2000, I planned a surprise party for Ben's 70th birthday. Ben thought the pastor of the Oklahoma City church and the church band were

coming merely because they had not been to our new meeting place. But they were coming to surprise Ben. Our regular attendees sat in their places as Ben gave the opening prayer. When he said amen, the church band struck up the birthday song and the front door opened. Our family and friends from all over (including Big Sandy) came walking down the aisle singing "Happy Birthday." We had an attendance of 103 that day.

- The teddy bear was first made on Feb. 15, 1903, and was 100 years old in 2003. The teens at church collected teddy bears and distributed them to residents of the local nursing home. It was a special day for all concerned.

- Our church had the annual community Thanksgiving Day one year with 100 people present. We had enough turkey, dressing and pumpkin pie left over to feed the prisoners in the jail next door. We got a lot of cheers from them because they thought they were going to have baloney sandwiches.

Final months

Ben's health was failing, and we were having to move to Oklahoma City so he could be close to the VA hospital. I have two special memories of those final months.

- A severe drought brought hardship to many in our area. One Sabbath, we decided to help by providing a pancake breakfast, a clothing giveaway and donations for school supplies. Members of the congregation came early. We had a group prayer and then opened the door to many people. One memory is a grandmother who was raising her four grandchildren after the death of their parents in a car wreck. She had tears in her eyes as she thanked us for the two black bags of clothing. She said: "I didn't know how I was going to clothe them for school." God's love helped a lot of people that day.

- Early in the year, a ragged unshaven homeless man smelled our food and asked if he could have some to eat. The men sat him at their table while the ladies prepared him a plate. He began showing up every Sabbath to eat and he was made welcome.

Last church service

Our last church service was mainly dedicated to Ben and me. Our friends presented to us a Bible autographed by everyone. As we sat on the front row, they came by to thank us and reminisce about the times we shared.

The homeless man came clean-shaven and dressed in clean clothes. He told us he slept in the garage of the widow of a man for whom he had worked, and she helped him look nice to tell us good-bye. One of the most humbling moments of our lives was when he knelt in front of us and thanked us for accepting him. We had tears in our eyes as we gave him a big hug. We learned that he died six months later.

Enjoy the ride

After everyone left, Ben and I walked slowly through the church reminiscing. Then we turned the key in the door and said "Goodbye." Our unexpected journey was over.

When God asks you to go on an unexpected journey, hop aboard. It is well worth the ride.