



2024 Spiritual Life Report

In Philippians 1:12 that the Apostle Paul wrote, *“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”* Though every minister has navigated uncharted difficult seasons, few have encountered the types of hardship that Paul faced. Paul’s desire was to land in Rome as a preacher, but instead he was there as a prisoner. He could have written a long letter about the suffering he encountered as a prisoner. Instead, he summarized his battles as “the things which happened unto me...”

For some, these types of battles could be considered failure and the reason to surrender. Yet Paul had a singular focus, the advancement of the Gospel. His circumstances did not produce joy, but the salvation of others in Christ did. The King James translation uses the word “forbearance” which translates as “pioneer advance.” It was a Greek military term referring to the army engineers who go before the troops to open the way into new territory. Instead of finding himself confined as a prisoner, Paul discovered that his circumstances really opened new areas of ministry.

Since 2020, our Northern California/Nevada Assemblies of God ministers have navigated significant hardship. Though most of it was hard to initially process, many have begun to emerge understanding the Gospel advancing purpose behind these difficult seasons. We pray that the experiences of these ministers will be an encouragement to those who read.



Rev. Steve Withey
Senior Associate Pastor
Green Valley Christian Center // Henderson, Nevada

I want to advance. But what if all I can do right now is retreat? You’ve already heard our Council theme for this year is “Advance,” taken from Philippians 1:12, *“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...”* If we read just one verse further however, what has

happened to Paul to advance the gospel becomes a sobering reminder for all of us, “...*I am in chains for Christ (Philippians 1:13).*”

Much of what Paul writes comes from his own places of difficulty and hardship. Just a few chapters later he writes, “...*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through Him (Christ) who gives me strength (Philippians 4:11-13).*”

We love the prospect of the Gospel being advanced through us, that idea of a Christ who gives us strength and the possibility of “all things” we can do *through* Him. We print it on t-shirts, embroider it on pillows and paint it on our walls. Athletes write, “Phil 4:13,” under their eyes, proclaiming, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” over touchdowns and homeruns. However, we tend to forget that when Paul writes, “*I can do all this through Him who gives me strength,*” he is talking about facing difficulty - being hungry and in need. We forget that when Paul writes, “*what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,*” he is talking about being in chains for the sake of Christ. We want to *advance the gospel and do all the things through Christ who gives us strength* but we forget that those things are often directly connected to difficulties and hardships we will face. Our greatest victories will stem from our greatest defeats. Our most radical ADVANCEment will come from retreating into the arms of Jesus.

This past summer I faced a time of difficulty that I realize now stemmed from years of my own internalized conflicts and dysfunctions as well as pent up emotions and frustrations leading to compassion fatigue verging on full blown ministry burnout. I found myself in a very dark place emotionally. I experienced thoughts I couldn't explain and overnight I felt overwhelmed with feelings of sadness and depression; I felt anxious, frustrated, even angry. I had zero patience for people, and just wanted to snap and scream at all of them. It got worse as the weeks bore on. My wife took notice, and so did my pastor. As I opened up to them about how I was feeling, both separately encouraged me to seek counseling.

God opened the door and led me to just the right person at just the right time. I found a therapist who was a credentialed minister with the Church of God in Christ. My therapist knew the Word and pointed me back to it constantly. He knew people, ministry burnout and compassion fatigue and was able to relate to me on a personal level in ways that I know many counselors would not. Most important of all, he knew the spirit realm and reminded me that, along with the psychological side of my struggles, my true battle lies with a very real enemy who twists the profound emotions God made me to experience to do damage to myself and others around me. When I feel sadness, I have an enemy who tries to nudge it into depression. When I feel Insecure, I have an enemy who tries to prod it into anxiety. When I feel angry, I have an enemy who tries to push that into bitterness and rage. I have an enemy who is constantly trying to gain a foothold in my life, attacking my mind and firing his flaming arrows of doubt, fear, depression, lust, hate, anxiety, and self-destruction.

With the help of my therapist, my family and, most importantly, my Jesus, I began to break through the tangle of dark thoughts and into the wondrous light and clarity of living life in victory with the God of the

Universe and the wondrous freedom that comes through Him. As Christ followers, we must remember that the greatest victories stem from the greatest defeats. This is most radically evident at the cross when, by all outward appearances, Jesus was defeated. Yet we know His death brought the greatest victory in all history for all people for all time. With Jesus, our defeats are turned into victories, because our advancement comes from retreating into Him. Only as I retreated more intentionally into the presence of my Savior did I advance through apparent defeat in my recent difficulties. He has brought me through to the other side and as I have leaned more into Him. I have seen His power and His presence more at work in my life, my family and my ministry. I love my wife more today than ever before, and she loves me. My kids love and worship Jesus, and actually want to hang out with me. Our church is growing, and people are pressing into the presence of the Savior, and that has nothing to do with me.

This is what Paul is saying when he writes that all that has happened has served to advance the Gospel, and that he can do all things through Christ who gives him strength. Even when Paul begged Him to take away one of his greatest hardships, Jesus reminded him that, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).”*

I needed to be reminded that it's not about me anyway. I am not here to change the world. Only Jesus can do that. I am just here to try to get closer to Him and to retreat into His presence more each day. When I do that, then He can use me and all that has happened in my life to *ADVANCE* His Gospel.



Rev. Tim Gavigan
Lead Pastor
Glad Tidings // San Francisco, California

The pandemic...on the surface, it looked like it interfered with our services. But what really happened has served to help us establish our Wednesday night ministry as a discipleship environment. It had previously become a sacred cow and looked like another service with a similar format as our Sunday service. What had previously become something sacred for our church began to morph into the relevant need of discipleship for our congregation.

The pandemic looked like it interfered with us meeting in the building — what happened really served to get our people outside the building meeting for community groups and serving in the City, as well as a food bank being established in our parking lot. We still have two monthly outreaches to the Tenderloin that started because of the pandemic.

During this season, it looked like we would run out of money — what happened really served to upgrade our building. We were able to remodel our kitchen, roof, and men’s bathroom while the building was unoccupied, without any disruption to our ministry operations.

We ended up with a huge budget surplus, which enabled us to say ‘yes’ to *every person* who reached out to the church with a financial need, for more than a year. Social distancing helped us get rid of the offering bag, and we actually added four missionaries to our monthly sponsorship list during the pandemic.

It looked like spirituality was going to suffer because of social distancing — what really happened served to rally people to our morning prayer meetings in record numbers. The accessibility of Zoom definitely helped with this as well (this meant that we had the skill set to do hybrid business meetings and prayer meetings heading out of the pandemic as well!

It looked like the church was under attack — what really happened served to propel the staff into deep questions about the purpose and mission of the church. We wrestled with whether the structure of contemporary church serves that purpose and mission, or the other way around. We emerged from the pandemic much surer of what we needed to do to grow a healthy church in San Francisco than we were prior to 2020.



Rev. Abe Daniel

Senior Pastor

Trinity Life Center // Sacramento, California

The church I lead has a unique history connected to the theme of finances. Trinity Life Center began in 1953 and has had financial issues since 1956. Of our 71 years of existence, 68 years have been a financial battle. Debt has held us hostage in pursuing Godly vision. The theme of money has also been the cause of many people leaving our church throughout our history based upon the way that we addressed finances. We have also battled church splits, misappropriation of funds, embezzlement, and great controversies that have contributed to our hardship.

I arrived as the pastor of this church in 2013 and felt that for every two steps we took forward, we were forced to take one step backward, normally connected to finances. I realized that finances became a convenient excuse for me to validate and even justify why we were the way we were. In 2021, as I was mowing the lawn at my house on a day off, I felt God challenge me with the area of finances for our church. His word for me was to begin to “tithe off of our tithe.” This meant we were to give 10% of every gift that came in that was not designated. I assumed it was fatigue from the yard work and did not tell anyone. For three consecutive months, I could not shake this same word. We were trending between 15-

20% below budget in the first quarter and the idea of adding an additional 10% “cut” did not seem like God’s word for us.

In April 2021, I shared this in a passing comment to our church treasurer for our board of directors. I shared it as more of a dismissive statement indicating that I was praying and processing the thought of giving 10% of our funds away to missions. I remember the smile on his face and his quick reply...pastor, it’s about time! Shocked by his response, I added the item for discussion with our board for the following night. My intent was to give them one month to pray for clarity. Instead, they unanimously voted in favor of this direction, and we began on the first Sunday of May 2021.

The morning after our Sunday service, I received our tithe and offering totals. I smiled and asked our team to write three checks to three of our strategic missions’ partners immediately. I remember signing the checks and dropping them in our outgoing mail. A few hours later, I noticed the mail had been picked up with new mail delivered. As I began to open our mail, I noticed a check for the exact amount that totaled the three checks we had just mailed.

On May 3, 2021, Trinity Life Center broke a financial trend that had crippled us for decades. Since then, we have given more funds away to missionaries and missions organizations around the world than in our history. Since then, we have concluded each calendar year by ending our finances in the black. We have encountered issues like every church, but something has shifted from poverty to generosity. What once held us hostage has now become our source of freedom! Financial hardship causes many to battle in ministry but we have seen the fruit of Philippians 1:12 as it “...has really served to advance the gospel.”



Rev. Greg Wendschlag

Senior Pastor

Abundant Life Assembly of God // Cupertino, California

In this day and age, not many of us have suffered the way the Apostle Paul did, but we can relate to his conclusion: With God, there is no such thing as unintended consequences. No matter what situations we encounter, if we trust God’s ways and timing, we know He will work to advance His Kingdom.

A few years ago, our church in Cupertino sold a property to another church congregation of Korean believers. We carried the loan on the small congregation who often struggled to make their payments on time. At the end of the loan period, a \$283,000 balloon payment was expected.

Our church didn’t have a lot of money and the thought of a large sum coming to us was so exciting! What we could do with hundreds of thousands of dollars! However, when the time came, the Korean group told

us they could not pay the balloon payment. Because of the past track record of late payments, we were frustrated and disappointed.

Some counselors told us to foreclose on them. Some advised us to file a lawsuit. As a leadership team, we were struggling with what to do. We felt we had done everything we could to help this church and now were being handed a raw deal.

After nine months of thinking, praying, and thinking some more, one Deacon brought up the idea of releasing the balloon payment entirely and cancelling the debt. I KNEW that couldn't be God! What about OUR ministry? What about OUR programs? We need the money, and they owe us! Our kingdom was at the forefront of our thinking while God's Kingdom was nowhere in sight. We prayed some more and started to realize what we needed to do. We decided to make the hard, right choice to cancel the debt. Our church membership responded with a unanimous approval.

I will never forget the looks on the faces of our brothers and sisters when we delivered the news. The relief was physical, emotional, and spiritual. They had been praying for God to make a way and He did, through us. Upon hearing the news of this miracle, back in Korea, the bank the church worked with posted a picture and story about the miracle church in Santa Clara County. People praised the Lord as they saw the story. We would have never anticipated when we forgave the debt people would give God glory on the other side of the world! But there is more...

A few weeks later, a man in the church decided to retire from his tech job and cash out a large portion of his stock owned in the company. I know you're already ahead of me. He tithed on the stock options and dropped off a check for \$300,000!

That learning experience has served to remind us over the years to always be generous and trust God for our own provision. *What had happened to us really served to advance the gospel..."*



Rev. Abby Sterling

Lead Pastor

New Hope Community Church // Santa Cruz, California

I pastor a small church located in Santa Cruz, California. Our facilities were built in the seventies. It is quaint, but certainly doesn't have a lot of space. Plus, noise carries all over the building. However, we love the sound of our kid's ministry growing.

I must admit that when my husband and I began pastoring this church, the size and condition of the church was discouraging to us. I was especially bothered by the condition of our fellowship hall. It needed a complete makeover. The church certainly didn't have the funds for such a project. However, in January

of 2019 our fellowship hall was flooded because of two broken pipes and a failed sump pump. That was a long and difficult repair. It felt like a huge setback in what we could do with an already small space. We filed an insurance claim and six months later we had a beautiful and newly renovated fellowship hall. We were thrilled to use this brand-new space for our first Vacation Bible School that summer.

We were enjoying momentum and growth in our church up until March of 2020. The shelter in place order was devastating to so many of us. Ironically, we discovered we would have had to cancel church that first Sunday of the shelter in place order regardless. When we arrived at our church on March 15, 2020, to greet anyone who wasn't aware our in-person church service was suspended, we discovered a giant hole in our sanctuary ceiling. There was a record-breaking windstorm in February of 2020 followed by heavy rain in March. This took a toll on our roof. A roofer came to inspect the damage and informed us we had dry rot in our sub roof and the whole thing would need to be replaced. Although that was another difficult and costly repair, I am amazed at how God took care of that need. We had been saving money for a "rainy day." Because of that reserve and the generosity of our sister churches in Gilroy and Aptos, we had a new roof installed during that shelter in place season.

We took advantage of that shelter in place season to finish up some other projects to update and beautify our church. As people began coming back, we would repeatedly hear comments about how warm and inviting our church felt. I recently heard someone say that whenever they come into our church it feels like they are walking into God's Living Room.

I have served in small churches and big ones. They both serve a valuable purpose in reaching the lost. I am amazed and admire how a "big" church can impact a community on a grander scale. I cut my teeth in ministry at a larger church. However, I have grown to also be amazed and admire the impact a small church can have on someone's life who would likely fall through the cracks in a larger church community. We have amazing people that don't feel comfortable in the larger crowds, in a church building that feels like a warehouse, or in a service with the lights turned down low. We have people who keep coming because they feel like they are visiting God's living room.

Turning our small space into a "homey" atmosphere has also enhanced our love of hospitality. This has built a sense of community and family that has been a lifeline to some of our people. We have folks that have previously been hurt by other churches. We have single parents who need a safe place to go and catch a break. We serve dinner every Thursday night and that ends up being the best meal some of our folks eat all week. Gratefully, we are seeing momentum come back again. We are seeing new people come to Christ and others find a new love for His Bride. People who find our small church appealing and comfortable. A small church that I initially thought could potentially hold us back and yet it is exactly what our church body needed. I have grown to love it and appreciate God's unique design and purpose for 1275 30th Ave in Santa Cruz.



Rev. Marcia Bethke
Lead Pastor
One Church // Modesto. California

"I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. — Isaiah 43:19b NIV

Wilderness & Wasteland

2023 was an Isaiah 43:19 year for us. We found ourselves in wilderness places. It felt like a wasteland at times. It was a difficult year. If you just looked at the surface of things, most would not have recognized the wilderness or wasteland as there were so many good things (more on that later)! 2023 was a year of change in our church. Things were being wrestled with that the Lord used to test us, prune us, refine us, and eventually encourage us with. But as we walked through the year, it was extremely difficult for many.

What seemed to be the strength of the past 11 years, our church structure, model, and mission was tested. Are we truly better together? Our leadership structure invites people to the table of influence. We are a multisite church that empowers, invests, and blesses the gift of God in others. From the "higher" levels of leadership like the Campus Pastor seat, to the "lower" levels of leadership such as the volunteer who serves in any given ministry. But we are still One Church, with one mission and one vision. Not everyone is called to this, but we believe we are. And this year, we were tested to live obedient to who we believe God has called us to be, even when it was difficult, or expensive, or wasn't what others wanted.

Ways & Streams

Through the wilderness & wastelands, He provided ways and streams. We were growing. We were financially provided for. People were getting saved, baptized, discipled. There is a very authentic move of the Spirit taking place. Supernatural healing. Deliverance. Kids and youth are on fire and living in the gift and call of God on their lives. It's not limited to one campus, location, or demographic...it is the work of the Lord in every location. The Lord was on the move and is still on the move. This is His church, not mine, not anyone's. He will build it. I am so thankful for that!

But then you have the first part of the scripture...we can't forget it. *"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" — Isaiah 43:19a NIV*

New Things

And as we enter 2024, we do see the NEW THING He *was* doing and *is* doing. He wastes nothing in the wasteland. Not just for me and the church that I get to serve in. But for those next to me. Those who

come, and those who go. While I am responsible for my assignment, it is not the only assignment. We are building the Kingdom, not any single church. And when something is a Kingdom win, we win!

I'll leave you with a few things that the Lord has spoken to me as I walked with Him through this difficult season. The first was to **GUARD MY HEART, NOT TO CONTROL MY CIRCUMSTANCES**. In every situation and season, I am commanded to guard my heart, not to control what's happening around me. I have responsibilities to be faithful with, but that doesn't mean I can control all the circumstances surrounding them. In life, I have very little control. In fact, I believe control is an illusion. At times, submitting to the Lord as a leader can look like control as we choose to be passionately obedient to His will and His way, not someone else's preference or suggestion.

I remind myself that I am not responsible for people's opinions or responses. I cannot live to please others and by trying to, I begin to pick up burdens that extend beyond my own obedience. It's been stated above, but control is an illusion. One that I don't want to live in. He is in control. I can trust in Him. And my posture is to guard my heart, not try to control circumstances or people or issues. Give me clean hands and a pure heart, Lord. I will manage my mind, adjust my attitude, and tame my tongue to help me keep my heart guarded.

The second thing the Lord spoke to me was **TO NOT GIVE THE ENEMY A SEAT AT MY TABLE**. The opportunity to pick up offense, anger, discouragement, or judgment of another is really tempting. And if I do, I give the enemy a seat at the table...access...influence...a voice that he should not have. My struggle is not against flesh or blood...although if I'm not careful I will assign a face to it. I will not invite the enemy in, even when my eyes (what I "see"), and my flesh (what I "feel") tells me to.

Finally, we began as a team to say this phrase, "**WE ARE GOOD, GODLY PEOPLE WHO NEED HEARTS HEARD AND ATTITUDES ADJUSTED AS WE REMIND OURSELVES OF WHO WE ARE**". This is true of me, this is true of you. This is likely true of those in your church that you find yourself having an issue with. We are good, godly people — we resist any label that would assume otherwise. We need our hearts heard — what each person has inside of them is important because they are important. And our attitude will need to be adjusted along the way — we often need a perspective shift, a heart or mind realignment. And lastly, we all need to remind ourselves of who we are — our role, position, and assignment on an organizational level, and our identity in Christ on a spiritual level — and when we remember who we are, and who we are not, we will live at peace.

God's plan is to **ADVANCE** His kingdom, and He uses us to do it. Through wilderness & wastelands, He makes a way and streams, and He does new things. I want to live submitted to Him. With clean hands and a pure heart. Learning lessons along the way. Honoring people, but always living to please Him.
