Twenty years ago this Spring, a popular and successful Episcopal priest named Dennis Bennett stepped into the pulpit of his flourishing church in Van Nuys, California, and made the most explosive statement of his ministerial career. He had, he told his people, received the experience known as “the Baptism in the Holy Spirit,” and it had changed his life. He was encountering miracles and discovering a new closeness to God. And yes, he spoke in tongues.

Bennett made his announcement in each of the three services at St. Mark’s Sunday morning. During the first service, he was rather encouraged to see an amount of reserved acceptance. During the second service, he watched in helpless horror as an assistant minister ripped off his vestments and stormed out of the church. And during the third, Bennett tendered his resignation.

Of course, Bennett, a priest in his early forties, had been expecting heavy weather since receiving his own personal pentecost five months earlier. Spiritually dry and hungry, he had encountered two Episcopal lay-people who told him of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. He was impressed by their obvious joy and freedom.

After months of reenactment this new spiritual territory, Bennett asked an Episcopalian friend to pray with him for the Baptism. After about 20 minutes of prayer, he found himself praying in a new language. But, he told his friends, he didn’t really feel anything.

The “feeling” came a few days later, after praying for some time in tongues, Bennett caught himself getting happier and happier. A presence of God, which he had sensed occasionally in the early days of his Christian experience, came to him in a greater force than ever before. It was, he said, as though someone had turned on a floodlight in his spirit.

For the first time in a long time . . . perhaps the first time ever, really . . . he felt the “rivers of living water” pour over his soul. The dryness was gone! He felt himself, as C. S. Lewis phrased it, “. . . a son of God, strong, radiant, wise, beautiful, and drenched with joy.”

In a mystified voice he asked his pentecostal friends, “Do you mean to tell me that a Christian can feel like I do?”

Yes, they assured him, a Christian could . . . and should . . . experience just such joy and closeness to the Lord.

Soon, Bennett began sharing his new experience privately with members of his congregation who came to him for spiritual guidance. Healings, miracles, and wonder of wonders . . . even good, loving fellowship became regular fare among the members of St. Mark’s “underground church.”

Along with that, of course, came rumors of scandalous midnight gatherings where all sorts of secret, unholy things were probably going on. Attempting to keep things hushed-up was like trying to put a lid on an earthquake.

Finally, the Lord assured Bennett that he must share his experience with the whole church, regardless of the consequences.

And on April 3, 1960, Dennis Bennett did just that. In so doing, he stepped out of the St. Mark’s pulpit and into the pages of church history.

Although Bennett was not the first “mainline” clergyman to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, he became the most notorious. Newsweek and Time featured the St. Mark’s event in their religion sections, and a prominent Los Angeles television station carried the story to millions of viewers . . . complete with a segment of Bennett praying in tongues.

The publicity broke just as the rector was moving to Seattle, Washington, to accept an appointment as vicar of the tiny, dying St. Luke’s Episcopal Church. It looked to many to be a kind of exile for the unintentionally controversial priest, but it was actually a vote of confidence.

The invitation to Seattle came from the Bishop of Olympia, who granted that there was nothing wrong with Bennett’s experience, and exhorted him to “bring the fire with you!” St. Luke’s Bishop Lewis added cheerfully, being given one last chance to survive. It was either new life or last rites for the old church.

The Holy Spirit, of course, brought the life that was needed. Bennett found in his new congregation a willingness to accept the reality of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. As a result, St. Luke’s grew from a sanctified Sunday morning echo chamber (population: about 3) to a Seattle re-
vival center where thousands upon thousands have found new life in the Holy Spirit. Even during Seattle's mini-depression of early 1970 (when a sign on Highway 99 read, "Will the last person leaving Seattle please turn out the lights?") St. Luke's kept right on growing.

In 1970, Bennett wrote a book about those first 10 years of walking in the Spirit, Nine O'Clock in the Morning (Logos International, 1970) has become one of the most widely-read books ever written on the charismatic awakening among historic churches and their clergy. A year later came The Holy Spirit and You, a “study guide to the Spirit-filled life” which he co-authored with his second wife, Rita. Both books have become classics in the charismatic movement, and they are still in demand 10 years later.

What sort of changes have taken place for Dennis Bennett since that stormy day in April 1969? And what does he see as the direction of the charismatic movement... and the Church as a whole... in the uncertain days to come?

Like the rest of us, Dennis is 20 years older than he was in 1960, but his 60-plus-or-minus years are not evident in his pleasant features. With graying temples, mirth-lined eyes, and always-present clerical collar, he could pass for one of those kindly Irish priests in the old Pat O'Brien-type movies of the 1940s except that Bennett is English, not Irish. (He has lived in the United States since the age of 10, however, and there is no discernible British in his accent.)

Rita Bennett is a petite lady with medium-length brown hair and a quiet demeanor who will, nonetheless, demonstrate her exercise trampoline for you in the same dress she wore to Sunday morning service. She has written one book, I'm Glad You Asked That, on her own, as well as a number of articles. She was associate editor of Trinity magazine, an enriching charismatic publication of the early 1960s, copies of which are as hard to find as Mazarin Bibles.

Together, they make an effective and likable team. They drive a red Volkswagen Rabbit, live in a pleasant but not flamboyant two-story home in the Seattle suburb of Edmonds, and generally live as unpretentiously as possible. Their only apparent extravagance is a Wang word processing system which takes up a good portion of their basement, and even that "luxury" is a practical business item. It allows the Bennetts to handle a huge volume of correspondence and other administrative duties without hiring a full-time personal secretary. It is also an invaluable editing tool for their increasing amount of book and article writing.

"The last 20 years have been largely a matter of a lot of travel, speaking, and writing books," Bennett says as he beings to retrace the changes that have taken place over the past two decades. "I've spent a little time, relatively speaking, pastoring this local congregation (of St. Luke's). But in spite of that, it has steadily grown.

The church, with an official membership of about 1,000, is not huge by modern evangelical standards, but the main reason for that is that St. Luke's has never really encouraged people to join. "We've been sort of a feeding station with people coming through... sometimes a couple of thousand a week at one point," Bennett says. "But in fact, we almost threw rocks at them to get them to go back to their own churches. And one of the results has been that there are now approximately 150 pastors in the Seattle area who have been baptized in the Holy Spirit.

The church facility, Bennett admits, "is nothing fancy at all." It is still basically the same St. Luke's it was in 1960, with a few "add-ons." Significantly, the church has no plans to begin a building program. Therein lies one of the most important indicators regarding St. Luke's future and—Bennett believes—the future of the Spirit-baptized Church as a whole.

"To accommodate our present congregation and allow room for growth would probably cost us about a million and a half dollars. And we, in good conscience, just can't see putting that into brick and mortar. The only alternative is to either reuse your premises over and over again, which we do as much as we can. The other," Bennett concludes with a sweep of his hand, "is this.

"This is the living room of a St. Luke's parishioner, Paula Shields. It is a very nice home overlooking a lake. The setting is significant because it is early Sunday afternoon and none of the people here—including Bennett—have been to church. Or rather, they have not been to St. Luke's. Instead, they sat in Paula Shields' living room, drank coffee, shared testimonies and burdens, prayed with one another, sang choruses, listened to what seemed like a very short sermon from Bennett (it actually lasted more than 15 minutes) and then celebrated the regular Episcopal Sunday morning communion service together. This afternoon they will have lunch together, fellowship for an hour or two, and then go home when they feel like it.

"I really don't feel that believers should come together to be stiff or formal, or think, 'Well, here we are performing a court ceremony before the Lord' or something like that," Bennett explained to the people that morning.

"Even in the most 'free-wheeling' churches, there's still a sense that people are there in their best clothes that they don't normally wear... maybe on their best behavior... all in nice neat, little rows... all looking at the preacher up there to tell them what to do. There's a time for formal occasions.

"But," he continues, "the early Christians didn't do this. We moderns are of the mind that church is another sort of school, where we sit down and are lectured. In fact, in many Protestant churches the official garment of the minister is an academic robe. He is there to teach, and we are there to be taught, and to be lectured, and to be scolded very often, and to have a little hell-fire shaken under our noses. That's very much what people have in mind as church," he says smiling.

All that is all right, Bennett allows. (One of the nice things about Bennett is the gentle way he qualifies his criticism. "Well, that shade of green could very well go with pink on certain occasions.") But that isn't why... or shouldn't be why... Christians come together. Those who have discovered the freedom of the Holy Spirit, he says, have also discovered why the early Christians assembled so often. They loved one another!

"Even the Spirit-baptized churches formulate a kind of charismatic liturgy," Bennett observes.

"We all raise our hands, or pray out loud, or say 'Let's all praise the Lord.' And we get down to a system.

"But when the spontaneity is retained... then we realize, 'This is why the early Christians got together even though they might get thrown to the lions. They wanted this fellowship of the Spirit! This is the most wonderful thing that could ever happen!'

Bennett says he's found that home meetings provide an atmosphere that contradicts "churchiness." Not only does it allow people to love one another freely, but there is no limit to the number of homes that can be filled. This, he says, is where his heart is today, and he's determined not to overrule our decisions. We are the ones who unconsciously put up blocks to God's power. I have little idea what such blocks might be in Elberta's case... but one thing I do know is that it was not a lack of trust in God on her part.

"All I know is that for some reason or reasons, the enemy was able to press in and attempt to bring about her death by disease which he and he alone caused, but in this he failed utterly and totally; for God... took her away... by a stroke as the Scripture had told me—that is 'in a moment.' God did not 'take her away' by means of the illness or death—for death, too, is Satan's thing—He took her away from illness, from pain, from death, into the glory of His kingdom.

Three years later, October 15, 1966, Bennett married Rita Reed. They had known each other casually for five years having met in a Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International convention in Miami in 1961. The story of their courtship is also told in Nine O'Clock in the Morning.
duct home meetings every Sunday if he could. As it is, St. Luke's conducts one home meeting per Sunday at various houses throughout the parish.

There are drawbacks, of course. The Episcopal church requires that only a priest can give communion. And if someone besides an ordained Episcopal minister is going to do the speaking, he must first have the permission of the bishop, and the rector must know what the speaker is going to say in the meeting. Then too, there is always the danger that some group will fall into heresy. But Bennett cites instances of churches that have overcome similar problems and now have strong home group programs, most notably Church on the Way in Van Nuys and the 100,000-member Central Church in Seoul, South Korea.

"I wouldn't stop having rallies," he adds, meaning Sunday morning church services. "You get 300 or 400 people together in a building and you have a great time. But no one's really in contact with anybody. The people still often go away with their needs unmet, and without having been personally ministered to. In a home setting, everyone has an opportunity to really be loved and share love."

Bennett recognizes that some pastors feel threatened by such a concept. "They're afraid that if they turn their back on the laymen, the laymen will betray them. But I've found that when you turn the layman loose, he becomes more loyal.

For St. Luke's, in fact, the laity has been a key to success. Because Bennett is gone so often, the lay people have historically been responsible for the day-to-day operation of the church. In recent years, he has been able to bring on capable assistant ministers, but he says he wants to increase lay involvement and responsibility.

"The growth of the parish is almost purely and simply because people have gotten baptized in the Holy Spirit...I turn my back on that place, and I never know what's going to happen! Several years ago I made the comment, 'One thing we haven't done around here is have a foot-washing.' Pretty soon someone started looking a little awkward, and then someone else said, 'Well, Dennis, last time you were away, we had a foot-washing.'"

That kind of thing, Bennett insists, is perfectly all right with him. What bothers him is when people begin to lose their spiritual initiative and "cool down" on their charismatic experience. He disagrees with the idea that the charismatic emphasis is changing, or that diminishing of spiritual excitement comes with spiritual "maturity."

"As far as I'm concerned, the basic emphasis of the charismatic experience has not changed and will not change," he says. "The central core of the charismatic movement is the rediscovery of the power of God, the love of God, the gifts and fruit of the Spirit, as realities in the present-day world; and people coming to an awareness of Jesus in their lives, and what that can mean."

"The real problem we have, I think, is people getting away from their original experience and then making excuses for it by saying, 'Well, we need to go on beyond the charismatic experience and find something further.' I believe we've got to learn how to stabilize ourselves and become mature in the experience. I believe we continually need to be coming back to what the Lord showed us in the very beginning."

That is not to say that Christians will not encounter dry periods in their spiritual walk. But, there are solutions.

"I don't believe God hides Himself. That's a thing you hear a lot. 'Well, God left me for awhile, or hid Himself to see what I would do, or something.' I really don't think God does that, because the Bible says that He is without variableness or shadow of turning. I think we hide ourselves from God, in one way or another. We turn our back to the light and then complain because it's dark."

Confusion is settled, Bennett believes, when we come back to our original experience. People can become very involved with teaching — even spiritual teaching — or doctrine, or leadership, and forget to keep filled with the Holy Spirit.

Beyond that, however, Bennett says that he and Rita have been discovering that spiritual desert experiences can be the result of "soul hurts" that require the ministry of inner healing. In the last few
years, inner healing has become an increasingly important part of their counseling ministry. They have even made it the subject of a new book, *Trinity of Man* (Logos International, 1970).

Most people, the Bennetts believe, need to let Jesus heal the hurts of the past. They invite people to acknowledge the presence of Jesus in hurtful scenes of their past, letting Him heal and modify painful memories. They recognize the great importance of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit in his healing work. Thus, inner healing becomes not only a means of cleansing deep hurts of the past, but of allowing people to rediscover and reclaim the excitement of the Spirit-filled life.

"As people get healed in their soul, emotions, and intellect, they begin again to move in the freedom of the Spirit," Bennett explains. Rita speculates that the 1980s will see an increasing emphasis on "healing of the soul." St. Luke's currently has about 25 well-trained inner healing counselors, and the Bennetts conduct three seminars on the subject each year. Rita herself holds several counseling sessions each week.

"I see it going into all different churches," Rita says, "and because it helps people in returning to some of their original spiritual freedoms, that means that the charismatic renewal will be renewed!"

The renewal itself has gone through some changes since 1960, Bennett observes.

"What we had for the first 10 years (1960-1970) was mostly a matter of people sharing their experience. A lot of testimonies. Most of them were good and very wonderful. Some of course, went off the beam. So we became aware that there was a need for teaching. Now we've had a decade (1970-1980) of teaching. I would say that 90 percent of it was good, but sometimes there was a lot of confusion because of differences in teaching."

Out of those differences in teaching arose the question of authority. What right does a person have to be heard and believed? That, Bennett says, is where we are today.

"The most strenuous discussions... are over the question of where are the leaders and what right do they have to be the leaders, and who says so, and so forth. We have people who are almost reconstructing the whole business of the papacy, reaching for absolute authority. Yet, I can understand why they're doing it. There's a groping now for what constitutes eldership and apostleship and so forth. And, we're getting a lot of answers. Many of them are right, but there's still some uncertainty about these issues."

That confusion, and a desire to resolve it, was the subject of a convocation for reconciliation and unity organized in February in Dallas by "Mr. Pentecost," David du Plessis. "Du Plessis, who for several years has been a kind of charismatic trail boss along the rocky route to Christian unity, is to traditional pentecostals what Dennis Bennett is to the charismatic renewal in the historic churches.

The purpose of the convocation, Bennett says, was not to resolve the controversial shepherding movement, but to reconcile the two opposing sides in Christian love.

"I didn't want to go," he confesses. "I went under protest. I went because David asked me to. I just didn't want to argue about it anymore. I put it on the shelf and said, 'Look, I'm not mad at anybody, but I just don't want to talk about it anymore. I've banged my head too often, and I can't get any answers.'"

But the keynote of the conference was forgiveness, and by the final day, Bennett sensed a tremendous love being manifest between the people.

"There were channels opened," Bennett says. "David said something that was typically David. 'Well,' he said, 'you know, if you have an enemy, you forgive them. That's your weapon, really. Let the Lord take care of them. Everybody in this room,' he said, 'I'll wash your feet.'"

Bennett was not a scheduled speaker, but on the last day, conference host Des Evans asked several people, including Bennett, to share a few words. The Lord had given him an odd illustration earlier in the week that he was able to use for the occasion.

"I happened to be the last speaker, and I felt led to talk about polarity. You see, if you run electricity through a solution, the solution will break down into its separate ions. If you run electricity through water, it gradually breaks down and becomes hydrogen and oxygen.

"If you carry it on long enough, the water will completely separate into two polarities, the positive and the negative. Not only that, but if you mix those two gases together, they form an explosive mixture. But if you burn them slowly, you get heat, and power, and light. And finally, you get the water back again.

"That's what happened to us. We'd all become polarized. We'd fled from one another. And whereas I'm no nearer to agreeing with what the shepherding brethren are doing than I was before... we got together and were talking. There were no resolutions. Nobody went away feeling, 'Well, we settled that.' But we did go away realizing we were going to be in contact with each other."

That sort of unconditional forgiveness is needed throughout the Christian community today, Bennett feels, because people tend to polarize over doctrines, teaching, and methods.

"Someone says, 'Healing.' Immedi-

*Read excerpts of the keynote speakers on page 49 in this issue.*
ately someone rushes to the other side and says, 'I don't believe in it.' On one side they're almost saying, 'Speak the Word and you're healed, like magic.' The other people react and say, 'No way. No healings today. If there's healing, it's the devil!' Polarize. Bring the two together and they explode. The truth of course, is in the meeting of the two. Yes, God does heal, but we're complicated people. When you make it that simple, you frustrate a lot of people.

"So, as we're talking, we produce a little heat, a little light . . . but we don't explode. And I believe that gradually the community is restored."

Balance has always been a key word in the Bennett's ministry. In fact, they are in the process of writing a book pointing out the necessity of balance in Christian living and teaching. But along the road to balance, there must be acceptance and forgiveness . . . and often a lot of pride.

"We're not commanded to demand forgiveness, but to give it. I went to a brother who I really do love, but I've not appreciated some of the things he's been doing . . . and vice versa. So I went to him and I hugged him, and he returned the hug. And I said, 'I'm sorry if I've offended you in any way.' And I was all ready for him to say back to me, 'Well, Dennis, thank you, God bless you. I'm sorry if I've offended you.' But he didn't! He said, 'I accept it, brother.'"

"I wanted very badly to say, 'Okay, I asked you, now you ask me!' But I didn't. The Bible doesn't say that if your brother does something against you, you go to them and require them to forgive you. It says that if you've offended your brother or sister, you go to them and receive forgiveness."

If the 1960s was the decade of testimonies, the 1970's the decade of teaching (with the question of church authority arising out of that), Bennett believes the 1980's may be a decade of testing. Though he says he's "not much on being prophetic," he is willing to point out some trends.

First of all, he does not have a lot of faith in the "big is beautiful" approach to Christianity.

"I don't think the fact that you can get 75,000 Christians together in a football stadium impresses the unbeliever. On the other hand, it does sometimes frighten the person who is afraid of Christianity and doesn't want it to get too far."

Bennett foresees increasing resistance to the Christian witness, especially to the kind of massive frontal assault tactics that have been popular the last few years.

"I don't think many people realize how 'de-Christianized' our country has become, or what the real hatred is for Christianity," Bennett says. "I think the word for today is the low profile. I really think the future of the Church is going to lie in the small configuration of Christians meeting in inconspicuous places. I'm convinced . . ."
Continued from page 27

not saying that people can’t have big meetings. But that’s not where the progress is probably going to be made. Where the battle is won and where things are really progressing is on the home front, in the small groups.”

Christian media are already running into problems, he notes. He cites an incident in Seattle where the Christian Broadcasting Network was not allowed to buy prime-time air space on a local television station. Other media figures, such as Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts, and Billy Graham, have encountered opposition on several fronts. And some ministries have overextended themselves financially.

Bennett believes that Christians need to meet this kind of opposition, but he appears to be concerned about the attitudes and methods some Christians employ to do it.

“It depends on whether Christians get out and fight bitterly or whether they get out and love. Too often, Christians get feisty and they adopt an ‘I’ll show you!’ kind of attitude. They get out and try to form a Christian political party, or whatever. And they become just like the thing they’re fighting.”

Although Bennett obviously believes in the dynamics of Christians getting together in small groups and informal settings, he is not sold on the idea of Christians forming into specialized communities, a trend he sees as a mark of our uncertain times.

“I can see how nice that would be, surrounded by believers all the time. But it would be too bad if Christians decided to form ghettos to defend themselves. We are supposed to infiltrate, not insulate.”

Bennett says he does not necessarily believe that this is the decade of Armageddon, though the world situation at times seems pretty grim.

“God promised Abraham, ‘In your seed, all the families of the earth will be blessed.’ This is why I have a hunch that the world is not coming to an end right away, because not all the families of the earth have been blessed. That may sound like universalism. I don’t say they’re all going to accept it, but I believe the opportunity is going to be offered.”

The Christian has an answer for a troubled world, but it is not by might or power, but by the Spirit of the Lord.

“The only possible answer to the world’s awful situation is the love of God, the forgiveness of God flowing out from Christians to the world. If they knock us down or even nail us to a cross, we still have to do it.”

Adversity, even physical bondage, may be the very devices God uses to offer His love to mankind.

“Look at Paul. They chained Paul to the soldiers. Biggest mistake the Roman army ever made! Next thing you know, the whole army is riddled with Christianity. They didn’t chain Paul to the soldiers; they chained the soldiers to St. Paul! Those soldiers couldn’t get away!”

Balance, love, forgiveness, renewal of the spirit, healing of the soul, genuine fellowship—all are key words for the 1980s. But the most important of these, Bennett says, is love.

“One of our councilmen here in Seattle—a man I respect very much—wants an ordinance that will say that a pornographic theater cannot open its doors within a thousand feet of a church. That, to me, is the wrong attitude. ‘We’ll show you! We’ll keep you away!’ We’ll shut you down!”

“I’d rather see the day come when the pornographic people try to get an ordinance passed that a church may not approach closer than a thousand feet of a pornographic theater!”

“Then, we’ll know our message is getting through. Then,” concludes Bennett, “we’ll really have something.”

D. W. Roberts is a free-lance writer from California. He is a frequent contributor to Charisma whose recent articles include: They Call Him Mr. Pentecost, and Where Are Youth In 1979?

[Image of Jesus in 80 poster]

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