



Giant First Steps Taken at Faithwalkers

By Luke Willamon

Faithwalkers 2011 was the experience of a lifetime for those who attended for the first time this year. God used the Great Commission (GCC) movement's annual Midwest summit at CenturyLink Center Omaha on Dec. 27-30, 2011 to encourage those in providing a deeper understanding of how truly wonderful the God we serve is. Lives change at this mountaintop conference—especially those who are rookies—and as opposed to previous conferences, this year's Faithwalkers centered on the encouraging aspects of God, rather than messages of conviction, granted we need both. With "Blessed" being the theme, it seemed that the central message was this: In order for our lives to change for the Lord, we need to understand how much God loves us, just as much as we need to know what God wants us to be doing in our everyday lives.

A number of first-time attendees from Candlewood were left in an incredible state of awe. "There's been so much information, it's hard to absorb, and it's wonderful," said Shaun Wood, a UNO freshman who grew up in a Christian home.

Paul Swartz of the Candlewood Working Singles (CWS) was overwhelmed. "It's all over the place, so just taking one thing from this conference is impossible," he said.

The teachings had UNO student Adrian Bartyzak engrossed. "You do not even have to try (to listen); it's inspiring to listen to the speakers and what they have to say," he said.

The worship team led by Jeromy Darling of The Rock in Minneapolis got rave reviews, as it does every year. UNO freshman Val Hecht described the



Our continually growing Candlewood family picture. Taken on the last day of Faithwalkers.

worship as "off the wall." Fellow student Joe Peterson loved the passion Darling displayed up front.

There's so much one can boast about with Faithwalkers. The worship. The dramatic teachings. The in-depth seminars. The intimacy of the tie-down times and fellowship among church families. The emotion. But so many got a deeper understanding of the much more important element of God's Kingdom: His love for us.

"(Des Moines pastor Tim Rude) said that He probably would not die for a wicked man...but Jesus Christ died for my sins," said the Catholic-raised Bartyzak.

Hecht, who was raised in a Christian home, offers a parental angle of God's love. "How big His love is. He sees me as perfect no matter what I've done," she said.

Swartz, whose brother, Drew, helps lead a Rock campus life group at UNO, does not feel more loved by God because of this Faithwalkers, but has come to a better realization and deeper knowledge of it. Why? Said Paul Swartz: "God loves. He does not have a degree of love."

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Jeremy Darling(right) and band performing during worship time.



Crowds of people gathering in the ballroom between sessions.

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online.

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As Hecht also pointed out, this conference is very personal. Many would say that God used this time to have over 1,700 conferences—one for each individual who attended.

Peterson, raised Catholic, went to the “Making Major Life Decisions” seminar offered by Mike Bourland, who helps Rude pastor Walnut Creek Community Church in Des Moines. He says that he was schooled on faith, God’s provision, and God’s plan: “Each plan is different because it’s specifically designed for each person,” said Peterson. “How do we have faith? We have to pray. He’s going to give us peace. He’s going to provide. He is going to protect us. I am more trustworthy of what’s going to happen, even though I have no idea what’s going to happen.”

Paul Swartz, raised in a stable Christian home without cable TV, felt that the Lord was teaching him humility. This is how he describes it: “Expecting the help from God and being willing to request it when we need it, and being willing to admit that we need it. So often when we have a conversation with somebody, they’ll ask you, ‘How are you doing?’ and you’ll say, ‘I’m good.’ But we’re constantly telling God we’re good when He has so much better than ‘good’ for us.”

Hecht went to the women-only “Where Have All the Ruths Gone?” seminar led by Celeste Rundquist, sister of Jeremy Darling, and daughter of the dynamic and very engaging Faithwalkers emcee, Minneapolis Rock pastor, and national GCC leader Mark Darling. Hecht was convicted to model her life after Ruth in the Bible, who was willing to leave her homeland, surrendering her will to the Lord.

Faithwalkers is always a formative time in the lives of first-time attendees, especially if they were saved into a relationship with Christ within that year. This is just a sampling of how God can use a three-day, four-night conference to change lives—and he will continue to do so throughout 2012, and yes, at the next Faithwalkers.

A Shared Experience:

Faithwalkers and Unity

By **Cindy Lara**

Members of the Candlewood family attended the annual Faithwalkers-Midwest conference in what becomes a shared experience of fellowship and unity. On Dec. 27-30, Candlewood learned about the joys and rewards of the Christian life. Although the theme of the conference always inspires or challenges our walk, Faithwalkers can also easily be credited with building a sense of unity within the church. Perhaps it is the fact that the church attends the conference together without the distractions of the daily routine, or it is the opportunity to spend nearly four days with the body of believers or sharing what God has placed in our hearts.

From the time that everyone arrives for the conference the first night or throughout the length of Faithwalkers, the sense of unity is apparent. By not staying at home and choosing to come to the conference two days after Christmas portrays the desire to be with the family of believers. Additionally, everyone comes with one mind and one purpose: to learn more about our relationship with God. For Jillian Whitney, the main reason to attend Faithwalkers is to seek the Lord and grow closer to Him. In doing so, together actively seeking God by praying and worshipping as one “is the most powerful way to become united as a church,” as she puts it.

The time spent at the conference builds unity because it transforms our walk as individuals, yet it unites us when we reveal our experiences. Danielle Archuleta finds Faithwalkers to be a time of encouragement or conviction. “It somehow breaks down a wall, multiple walls, or your entire heart,” she admitted. “It just brings us all closer together to share each other’s burdens and relate to them in a very transparent way, which is very humbling,” she said.

Within lifegroups, unity is elevated to another level. According to Kelly Mand, spending time together and hearing from the different speakers is a



Vao Yang leading the group in a mini-worship session after dinner.

unifying time. “You’re just doing it all together. You’re learning just truths about our God, our creator, together,” she said.

Also, two annual traditions define forms of unity for our church: a group photo at the end of church tie-downs and bandana day. The group picture has become a staple of Faithwalkers, one that Joe Krontz considers as his favorite. “Each year, we get to see a lot of the same faces in that picture, but we also see some new ones, too, so that’s just showing that God is adding people to the church. I know that God uses it in our lives to unite us and bring us together,” Krontz said.

Bandana day for Sarah VanRaden is a vital representation of unity. “You see everyone else from your church wherever you go. You can pick them out in the crowd and it just builds that camaraderie and it builds that heart just to be together – us, Candlewood, a family in the midst of all these 2,000 people; there’s us, there’s our little family. Together,” she said.

Said Vao Yang, the opportunity to meet with our King brings “us to the same page of understanding what God’s will is, making us like-minded, so we can all roll as a church to accomplish God’s will for our city.” Ultimately, the realization to reach Omaha binds Candlewood.

Faithwalkers Tie Down

By Rebecca Whitney

With hundreds of people at Faithwalkers, it could be easy to get lost in the busyness of the conference. Back-to-back sessions and seminars fill up most of the day. Just simply jotting down notes and Bible references, watching inspirational videos, and hearing story after story of God's work in the lives of the men and women teaching would not be enough. Therefore, making time to hear how attendees were challenged in their walk was a must. And after each full day of teachings, the Candlewood faithful were eager to share what God laid on their hearts. So no matter where one is after the last evening main session, huddles of Candlewood members, pouring over their day's notes and sharing with each other what they had learned, was a scene easy to spot.

"I love tie-downs with my life group," said Katya Huggins, Prairie Wind, The Rock. "Because I am able to hear what is on the hearts of the women I am working with."

Huggins' appreciation and heart for tie-downs with her life group draws her closer by giving her a chance to really know the strengths and weaknesses of each member. "We start out sharing our heart and what we are struggling with and by the end of Faithwalkers, I am able to see how much they have grown through the last couple of days," said Huggins.

And to most all members, hearing what your life group is learning is a privilege and an opportunity no one is willing to let pass by. Members feel a sense of security and willingness to open up when they are being surrounded by close knit men and women.

"Our life group grows closer together because we learn what each and every person is learning from the conference and what they are going through," said James Osborn, Prairie Wind, CWS. "We get to know them better."

As Osborn explained, Faithwalkers tie-downs play a crucial role in building unity. In most cases, a spirit of brokenness and humility is just what every

life group needs. When members feel vulnerable, they are apt to share what is on their heart, and as a result, they have the support and love of their life group standing alongside them to help encourage and spur them on in their walk with God.

Some members love the heartfelt discussions that are prone to take place during tie-downs.

"I look forward to just hearing the ladies' hearts that you don't get to hear while the dudes are around," said Chelsea Jones, Westside, CWS. "I even like it when the ladies are crying. It shows they are being real and that God is moving on their hearts."



Candlewood's group tie down where people share what they've learned.

Sometimes tie-downs are even used to give each other different perspectives on teachings. What one person takes away from a teaching, another person may have completely missed.

"It's really cool to see how my brothers and sisters have been impacted with a lot of the same messages and how they took different parts of it maybe than I did," said Noah Carpenter, Prairie Wind, The Rock.

When life group members are sharing their thoughts from the day's teachings, new concepts are revealed to other members. Sometimes during tie-downs, members are teaching each other, in a way.

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Faithwalkers Tie Down

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“It's really cool to see how they are growing and to see how they are going to put what they learned into practice once we are gone from Faithwalkers,” says Carpenter. Carpenter brings up a whole other side of tie-downs—accountability. Not only are members encouraged with hearing what everyone is learning, but they are also excited and ready to see how they can work together to apply the teachings to their everyday lives.

At conferences like Faithwalkers, tie-downs are where life group unity is built. With all the challenges and encouragement taken in, life groups are eager to share what they are excited and willing to change for the Lord. And because members are being open and humble before each other, they are able to cast a vision for how they want to change and what they want to see accomplished for God's Kingdom. For what greater a force than when brothers and sisters understand each other's hearts, have a vision, and are running with it.

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