



told Rosenberg to do something he felt would be fatal to the church. "They told us to drop our missionaries so the church could survive," he says. "I told them, 'If we do that, we have no reason to exist. Missionaries are our lifeline.'"

Sticking with it

Rosenberg grew up on the plains of Kansas during the Great Depression. The son of an Assemblies of God minister, he never eschewed hard work and embraced the concept of holding onto material things loosely — especially any wages he earned.

"Tithing and giving were normal happenings in our family," he says.

To earn money he plowed fields on the family tractor. Doing so earned him \$3 a day, which he used to buy school clothes and other luxuries he wanted. Called to ministry, he sought license with the Assemblies of God. His first pastorate was in a gas station where three people met for services. In little more than a year the tiny congregation grew to 40 people.

A year and a half later Rosenberg moved to northern California to be an associate pastor. He bought a \$75 trailer, loaded up his family's belongings and moved to Sunnyvale.

There, Rosenberg, his wife and baby daughter moved into a small house. They sold the trailer for \$300. For the first time in Rosenberg's life he felt rich. Not sure what to do with the windfall, he decided to save the money because it felt good to finally have a cash reserve.

the prospect of new jobs.

With them went close to \$1 million in pledges.

Things got worse for the church. Building engineers discovered poor soil where the new sanctuary was being built. Before construction could continue, they said, the soil needed to be removed and replaced. Doing so would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Interest rates soared past 20 percent. Even worse, the congregation's weekly tithe dropped from \$30,000 to \$11,000.

Both televangelists the church endorsed suffered moral failures within 14 months of each other. People in the community and even in the church suspected the church's leaders also lived double lives.

More people left.

In an attempt to keep the church open, salaries were slashed and several staff members laid off. The bloodletting helped, but something even more drastic needed to be done to pay the bills. Rosenberg obtained a loan for \$3 million to keep creditors at bay. Advisers also

Things were going real well.

The church had opened its doors in 1962 and gone from one building campaign to the next. Staff members were added regularly to accommodate the ever-growing congregation.

With a reputable name in the community, church leaders and laypeople unashamedly took the gospel into the marketplace and neighborhoods. The church even publicly supported and promoted two nationally known televangelists. In the early '80s the congregation pledged nearly \$2 million to build a new sanctuary.

"Then the testing time came," says Hugh Rosenberg, founding pastor of Tri-County Assembly of God in Fairfield, Ohio.

A local automobile plant closed. Workers were laid off, including some 100 congregants from the church. Many of those families moved to the South drawn by

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Bouncing back

A few weeks later, during a Sunday night service, a missionary talked of the need for the gospel to be spread in Fiji. Compelled by the Holy Spirit, Rosenberg gave the \$300 to the missionary.

"That was the beginning of a journey with missions for us," he says. "Ever since then, missions has been our heartbeat."

That fact didn't change when the Rosenbergs moved to Ohio to start the planting of Tri-County AG in 1961. And it certainly didn't change, adds Rosenberg, when the church faced potentially lethal financial times in the 1980s.

"Despite several impossible situations, we continued to support our missionaries without reducing

or dropping our financial pledge to them," he says.

But the church was spiraling toward financial ruin. Rosenberg found refuge each night at the church's altar where he cried out to God. An answer to his prayers came in the most unexpected way.

Miracle

Rosenberg learned of a family in the community embroiled in a controversy at a local hospital. Doctors wanted to amputate a boy's cancer-plagued arm. The boy's grandparents, his guardians, wanted to pursue other medical alternatives.

Rosenberg went to the boy's room and prayed with him and his grandparents. Through his subsequent visits to the hospital he developed a friendship with the family.

After a period of time the can-

cer took the boy's life, and the grandparents asked Rosenberg to conduct the funeral service. He did.

After the service the grandfather thanked Rosenberg, handed him a check for \$50,000 and asked how the church was doing financially. Rosenberg admitted the church was in poor financial condition. The man asked how much debt the church had. Rosenberg reluctantly told him about the \$3 million debt.

The next day the man gave Rosenberg a check for \$3 million to pay off the loan.

Keeping the faith

Twenty-five years after the Rosenbergs gave their \$300 to the missionary from Fiji, their eldest daughter, Renee (whose last name

is now Carlson), went to Fiji as a missionary.

Today the church, now pastored by Rosenberg's son, Brad, is debt free and continuing to reach people with the gospel.

"As Christians we must give out of our resources," says Rosenberg. "But why not go beyond that and embrace a true faith challenge — something we can't do alone, but only with God's help? That's when things get exciting."

So exciting that a church springs to life and suddenly the unexpected happens. As Rosenberg found out, it's all part of the art of bouncing back. **tpe**

KIRK NOONAN is associate editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

GIVE to LIVE

California church reboots and targets missions

For months there had been more weeds than cars in the parking lot. Exterior walls seemed to beg for a fresh coat of paint. Like many abandoned buildings, this one needed attention from visionaries who would roll up their sleeves, peel off the blue, plastic tarp covering the sign and invest the time and energy required to restore and reboot a forgotten church.

Yancey and Jill Valdez were such people.

After meeting with Ray Rachels, superintendent of the Southern California District of the Assemblies of God, the Valdezes traveled to Prather, a small community perched atop foothills overlooking Fresno. For decades the church, which Valdez renamed New Life Christian Assembly, had struggled to survive as pastors came and went.

"It has been difficult to minister here for many pastors because jobs were scarce and most pastors would have to be bivocational and live in Fresno, which is 30 minutes away," says Yancey Valdez. "The logistics prevented many pastors here from being involved with the community establishing relationship, which is crucial."

When the Valdezes arrived in October 2000 Yancey found work driving a school bus. In the couple's off time they restored the church, networked in the community and prayed. Once they opened the doors to the church, they had to convince community

members they were committed to the area. That took two years.

"After we passed the two-year point it was amazing how God opened doors in Prather for us," says Valdez.

The congregation grew steadily, one family at a time, to 80 people. Eventually Valdez quit his job to serve full time at the church. Since rebooting the church, he has emphasized the importance of giving to missions.

Congregants have eagerly responded. During his first year as pastor, Valdez saw the church give \$4,500 to missions. Each year after that, the church gave thousands more. In 2004, the church gave more than \$25,000 to missions. By the end of 2006 they hope to reach \$100,000 in missions giving. Doing so, says Valdez, has been key to the life of the church.

"God is touching people and changing lives through this church," he says. "We are a missions-minded church. We've learned it's best to open our

hands, let things go and reach out to other people. Because we do that, God has blessed us."

For Valdez, coming to Prather to minister took a step of faith and a willingness to follow God no matter what challenges loomed. Valdez believes what it says in Jeremiah 29:11, that God has a plan for every person — and, he adds, for every church.

"God does not set us up for failure, but sometimes He sets us up for growth," says Valdez. "As long as we follow the Lord closely He'll lead us to places where we can succeed."

— Kirk Noonan

'God saved this ministry'

Pastor Russell Hodgins came to International Christian Center in Staten Island, N.Y., eight years ago. He accepted the pastorate of a congregation of about 100. He also accepted the burden of a church facing foreclosure and financial ruin.

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