A son's legacy — *and a father's foundation*

At 33, Pastor Joel Sims of Word of Life Church in Flowood, MS, has already served in executive church leadership for more than a decade. He has also undertaken a $29.4-million in construction project — some of it completed, and some just beginning.

By anyone's standards, Joel is a young pastor with a big, *big* job.

And for many church leaders-in-training, the circumstances driving his rapid ascension to the senior pastor role could have severely complicated matters: At 17, Joel's father, Ronnie Sims — the church's founding senior pastor — passed away. At the time, Joel was a senior in high school.

Though devastated by the loss, Joel's family — including his faith family at Word of Life — persevered ... and *grew*. His mother led the church for two years, while Joel attended Rhema Bible Training Center in Broken Arrow, OK. In 2005, at just 19, Joel returned home to Jackson, MS, where he took over as senior pastor.

Shortly before his passing, Ronnie Sims laid the groundwork for a $10-million construction project at the church. The property was purchased and developed. Trees were torn out, and a parking lot was put in place. The foundation for the new sanctuary was put down. Plans were drawn up.

Then, a significant setback: those same plans detailed a project scope that exceeded the church's intended budget by more than 200%! "We found out because, when the plans were done, [my dad] put them out for bid," Joel recalls. "The cheapest we got back was $22 million."

Not only that, but those plans themselves cost $750,000 to commission — a significant financial expenditure.

As Joel recalls, the architect hired was just starting his own practice, and Word of Life might only have been the architect's first or second church client. It's a common mistake, he acknowledges.

"Almost every pastor I talk to has run into the same thing," Joel says. "It's really not their fault. They have an idea for a building, and their first stop, typically, is an architect."

Pastor Joel Sims and his wife, Peppi

Though wonderful people and fantastic artists, Joel points out that many architects lead with a single question: *What do you want in a facility?*

"When a pastor hears that question, he immediately begins to talk about the sanctuary he wants, the children's space he wants, the café he wants, and on and on," he says. "By the time he's done, the architect has designed exactly what the pastor wants ... but with very little thought for what the pastor can *afford*."

Joel didn't want to make that mistake: "I wanted to do something we needed — and could afford — first."

It would be a decade before his son, Joel, would take up the reins of that massive project. And while the foundation had been laid by his father (literally and figuratively), the project was, essentially, a blank slate.

A better way emerges

Fortunately, Joel is blessed with an experienced internal team at the church, including "an amazing CFO [Janet Dannington] who keeps us profitable." As an example, Joel says, the church will borrow between $10 million and $12 million against the $18.2-million Phase 2 price tag. With smart, proactive planning, the church has been making a payment to itself every month, without the need for a capital fund campaign.

"This way, we know we don't have to stress the congregation," he says. "We don't have to stress ourselves, and we don't have to turn into fundraisers instead of pastors."

But, Word of Life still needed a partner to make the bricks-and-mortar campus a reality.

At a church conference in Tulsa, OK, Joel and Dennington attended a class on how to ensure a successful church building project. The session presenter was Charlie Daniels, owner and president of Churches by Daniels in Broken Arrow, OK.

Daniels offered a very different approach than Joel was familiar with: hiring a contractor before hiring an architect. In other words: The architect designs not just what the pastor wants, but what the pastor can *afford*.

This approach resonated with Joel in a big way. "It sounded so simple and so smart," he recalls.

More than that, Joel was aware of his own shortcomings as a pastor — one who (like the vast majority) doesn't build a building every year, every other year, or even every five years. "For me, I have to trust the people who do this for a living," he explains. "I have to trust that a builder will come to me and say, 'Pastor, I know you just said you want a balcony. You should know that will add $700,000 dollars to the budget' — and that's money the church might not have."

Charlie Daniels ticked all those boxes, and more.

Even so, guided by due diligence and good stewardship, Joel and his team interviewed several other providers first. They requested to see past church work and portfolios. They asked for references — pastors and board members alike. They asked for walk-thrus of church projects and explanations, along the way, for why certain elements were designed in certain ways.

"After that, Joel says, "we prayed."

In the end, Charlie and his team were the clear choice. As Joel explains: "We just felt so much peace using them."

With a total project cost of $11.2 million, Word of Life's Phase 1 was completed in spring 2011. Today, $18.2-million Phase 2 is getting underway, including a new, 2,000-seat sanctuary.

For one thing, Charlie himself is the son of a pastor. And, *his* dad was a church builder, too — in every sense of the word. "He would go to a place that had no churches, and literally build the church — not just figuratively, like, getting people in the doors, but building the actual facility," Joel explains. Then, when that church was built up enough to be self-sustaining, and a new pastor was able to step in to support it, Charlie and his father moved on to build another one.

"Charlie's passion for building is great, and he's a fantastic builder," Joel says. "But, his heart for pastors and ministry was unique.

"You can give someone strategy, but you can't give someone heart. Charlie has the heart."

Phase 1: engage!

With the right building partner enlisted, Joel and his team set about completing the bulk of Phase 1. Family-friendly design was at the forefront because, as Joel explains, it mirrors the church's mission statement: a family church with a world vision.

With a total project cost of $11.2 million, Phase 1 was completed in spring 2011. On April 17 that year, the church welcomed its first worship service in a brand-new, 900-seat sanctuary. New offices, adult education areas and a café were unveiled.

Perhaps most important, on that day, members and guests found ample spaces devoted to ministry for infants, toddlers, children and youth — well beyond a playground (although there was one of those, too). Families came to church that day to find state-of-the-art children's and youth facilities. A next-generation pastor was on staff to coordinate with a multitude of directors — nursery, preschool, children's church and youth programs — and facilitate a system of spiritual growth.

"It's just the same as having a system for educational growth in a school," Joel points out. "Families are huge for us. I have three young children myself coming up through these children's programs, as does a lot of the staff. It's just so necessary."

Clearly, this formula has been pivotal for the church; today, an $18.2-million Phase 2 is getting underway at Word of Life. A new, 2,000-seat sanctuary will go up, and the existing 900-seat worship space will be divided and transformed — half as a children's church, half preschool ministry space.

"Just don't do it alone"

Clearly, Word of Life's growth was not without its potential setbacks. To persevere (indeed, to thrive!) in the midst of the most challenging circumstances has taught Joel a very important lesson — one he says every pastor needs to heed: Don't go it alone.

"Often times, we, as Christians — and as pastors — have this logic that all we need is God," he points out. "But God said, 'You need someone.' Jesus didn't try to do it alone. Paul didn't try to do it alone. For us, as pastors, I think were afraid to admit weaknesses or fears or concerns — to share the weight or the load. But, I'd strongly recommend reaching for help and building a team of people around who can help."

To that end, Joel says he considers Charlie Daniels "as much as a team member as anyone, here." And, having someone like that in the church's corner — even before construction starts — offers huge peace of mind.

"Even with an $18.2-million facility, I trust Charlie to look at our financials and say, 'Hey, you can / can't afford that,' or, 'Joel I think you need to save more.'"

"It's been a game-changer. It has taken away the fear." CE

— Reporting by RaeAnn Slaybaug

QUICK FACTS ABOUT WORD OF LIFE CHURCH

Year Established: 1980
Location: Flowood, MS
Number of staff (full- and part-time): 29 / 17
Combined weekend attendance: 3,250

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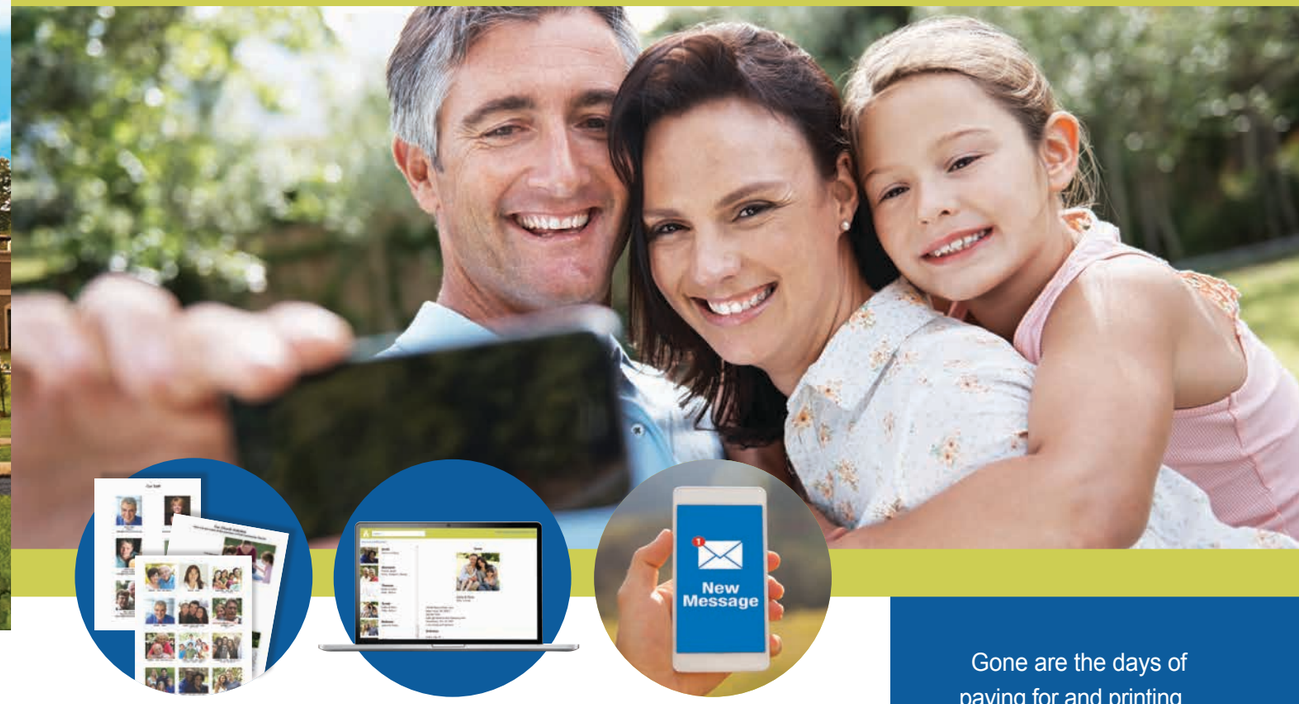

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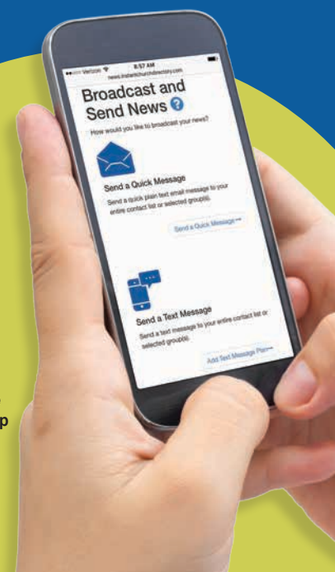

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