

## A season of Transition, Growth, and Vision (1986–1996)

**(Slide 2)** Ecclesiastics 3:1 (NKJV) To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

Long before there were growth, expansion, missions or multiple services there were faithful people who simply believed and learned to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

**(Slide 3)** Hebrews 6:10 (NKJV) For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.

**(Slide 4) (picture of Pastors Illuminado and Iris)**

**(Slide 5) Our old building**

**(Slide 6) First families of HOP**

The first decade of our church were the foundational years; years of sacrifice, prayer, vision, and resolve. They were years where our founding pastors and leadership team of men and women laid the spiritual foundation upon which everything else would later be built.

Those early years were not always easy, but just as a house must be built on a solid foundation, they were essential. It was in those foundational years that God shaped the identity, values and Spiritual DNA of our House.

Everything that came afterwards was built upon the prayers, sacrifice, and obedience of our founding leaders.

Through Pastors Illuminado and Iris leadership, God established a church rooted in worship, prayer, the Word of God, and a love for the church and those far from God.

Many of us are here because they answered the call of God. We will forever be grateful for their example and pray that we too will leave a spiritual legacy like theirs.

Tonight we will focus on the second decade of our church history.

This decade was not just about a building, programs, or leadership changes, they were about God preparing the church for greater influence.

Ecclesiastics 3:1 (NKJV) To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

**(Slide 7) A SEASON OF PREPARATION (1985–1987)**

From 1985-1988 God Was Preparing the Next Generation of leaders.

In the foundational years, we never had a formal youth ministry. However, since most of most of the young people preferred speaking English and the adults conducted their services in Spanish, the founding pastor's son, Edwin Marrero, who today serves as one of our elders, helped organize an English service for young people on Friday nights.

As the ministry grew, a team of young leaders (*called the service group*) emerged to help lead worship, preach, and serve in various roles. I was privileged to be one of them, as was Eileen, although neither of us knew at the time that God was preparing us not only for ministry, but for each other as well!

Fast forward to 1985, the same year Eileen and I were married, Pastor Illuminado asked us to become volunteer youth leaders. We had no idea then that God bringing us into another season to prepare us for future pastoral leadership.

**(Slide 8)** We were simply taught a principle that shaped our lives: *"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."* (Eccl 9:10)

### **(Slide 9) Picture of our youth with some of the leaders**

So, we began gathering the few teenagers in our church and doing what we ourselves had experienced and been taught; making disciples. We spent time teaching young people to love the Word of God, to pray, to worship, and to win souls.

What seemed like small and ordinary at the time became part of God's overarching plan. Those years were not just youth ministry years they were another season of preparation.

I want to encourage you: I want to encourage you: Embrace the season you are in today. God is always working out His purpose and plan, even when nothing significant seems to be happening. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your heart as unto the Lord.

One day, you may look back and realize that God was preparing you for something far greater than you ever imagined. What may seem like an ordinary season may actually be part of His extraordinary plan for your life.

**Transition:** While God was preparing leaders behind the scenes, a much more difficult season was about to arrive. What seemed like a setback would become another opportunity for God's faithfulness to be revealed.

### **(Slide 10) Grace for a Difficult Season**

In 1988, Pastor Illuminado became ill and stepped away from leadership, and the church entered a fragile and challenging season. Yet God gave grace through Pastor Iris, who faithfully continued leading the church alongside the elders during those important years.

It was during this season that she asked me to serve as assistant pastor, entrusting me with greater responsibility on top of working a fulltime job outside the church.

I am deeply grateful to have served under the leadership of Pastors Illuminado and Iris, whose example of faith and commitment left a lasting impact on my life.

I am also thankful for the elders who loved the house of God, believed in the vision, and remained steadfast through every season. And I am grateful for our church family, who

embraced their leaders, believed in the mission, and faithfully stood with us through times of challenge, transition, and growth.

What could have become a season of instability instead became a testimony of faithfulness, perseverance, and unity.

Even through the challenges of caring for her husband while leading the church alongside the elders, Pastor Iris modeled courage, faith, stability, and a deep love for God and the local church.

**(Slide 11):** Her prophetic declaration, “This is not the work of a man, but of God,” served as an anchor for the leaders and the congregation, keeping us from being distracted by the many voices expressing concern about the future.

Her key passage of Scripture also became a reminder of God's call upon this house:

**(Slide 12)** “Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert... This people I have formed for Myself; they shall declare My praise.” (Isaiah 43:19, 21 NKJV)

Through this passage, God continually reminded us that He was still at work and that the future of this church remained in His hands. As a result, the core leaders grew stronger, the church remained united, and together we embraced the future with expectant hope and steadfast faith.

Once again, God demonstrated His faithfulness!

**Application:** Many of you may find yourselves in a season of transition, uncertainty, or even great challenge. Trust God in the process. Stay in the game; don't quit!

**(Slide 13)** The One who called you is still at work, even when you cannot see what He is doing. He is faithful to guide, strengthen, and sustain you through every season. Keep trusting Him, because His purposes are greater than your present circumstances.

**(Slide 14)** Galatians 6:9 (NKJV) And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

As God brought stability during a difficult season, He also began stirring fresh faith for the future.

**(Slide 15)** A pivotal Event: Nicky Cruz (1990)

One of the pivotal events of this season was at the end of 1990. Pastor Iris and the elders had sensed to invite Evangelist Nicky Cruz to preach and share his powerful testimony.

**(Humor)** This was before the World Wide Web, social media, and digital marketing. Back then, if you wanted to get the word out, you used the newspaper! So, we placed an advertisement in *The Morning Journal*.

**(Slide 16)** (Newspaper ad of Nicky Cruz)

The ad ran on Friday, November 16, 1990, on page 15; right next to St. Nicholas Church's Annual Christmas Arts and Crafts Bazaar. Apparently, Nicky Cruz and Christmas crafts were competing for attention that week!

But God used that simple newspaper ad in a remarkable way. People came from all over the city, lives were touched, and many came to know Christ as Lord and Savior.

For those of you who are too young or new to Christ to know who this Nick Cruz was here is a little about him.

Nicky was born in Puerto Rico and became one of the most notorious gang leaders in New York City during the late 1950s. As the leader of the Mau Maus gang, he was known for violence, crime, and deep anger rooted in a troubled childhood.

*(If you've seen the remake of "The West Side story", you'll get the picture of his story)*

Nicky was saved under the ministry of the late Pastor David Wilkerson from a small town in Pennsylvania who sensed the call of God to minister to violent street gangs and drug addicts in New York City.

**Slide 17** *(Picture of book along with a picture of Nicky and his friend Israel receiving bibles in exchange for a bat)*

BTW, his story as well as the story of Nicky's conversion is amazing and can be found in the book, **The Cross and the Switchblade**. You can still find it on amazon or your local library.

**(Slide 18)** The event with Evangelist Nicky Cruz took place at auditorium of the old Southview High School located in South Lorain.

**(Slide 19)** The auditorium was filled and we saw so many people come to Christ that weekend.

**(Slide 20)** Sunday morning for the first time we not only saw our church sanctuary filled with people we had to set up chairs in the overflow.

The dropped in us a picture of what the future could look if we stayed true to the mission of winning souls and making disciples. More people could be reached for Christ!

## **(Slide 21) A NEW SEASON OF DEFINED VISION (1991-1996)**

Ecclesiastics 3:1 (NKJV) To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

- **(Slide 22)** 1991 — We were set in as senior pastors (Eileen continued to lead the youth for about five years)

**(Slide 23)** Picture of the new pastoral family

**(Slide 24)** A picture of our youth with David Villa and Rick Mercado helping as teachers)

**(Slide 25)** David Villa, who was also one of our elders, became my associate pastor. He played a vital role in helping establish a discipleship process for new believers and assisted me in baptizing many of those who came to faith in Christ.

On Good Friday of that same year, Mark Hebebrand made a public confession of faith and began his journey with us. Like so many others, he became part of what God was building in our church during that season of growth and vision.

- **(Slide 26)** 1992 — New vision and mission statement adopted

**Vision:** Called to the nations to show forth His praise, his life, his love and his power.

**Mission:** Building a strong body, equipped and established in the word and prepared to take the gospel to their neighborhood, city, country and beyond.

**Simplified today:** “Called to love God, serve people and reach our world”

**(Slide 27)** In was also 1992, Bob Kistemaker came to our church as a new believer.

Through discipleship and faithful growth, God prepared him for ministry, and he would eventually become one of our church planters. Today, the church he planted, New Life Church, is celebrating its 20th anniversary; a testimony to the power of investing in people and making disciples.

During this season, I was closely connected to the youth ministry and had personally discipled many of the young men in the church. Often, I would take the young people on what I called "vision walks" around our property. As we walked, we would talk about what God could do in and through our church in the years ahead. I would draw out what I imagined an expansion of our facility would look like.

For me, building a bigger building was never the vision. The vision was to create a place where people could be discipled, equipped, and sent out into the community to reach others for Christ. The building was simply a tool; the real mission was making disciples and advancing the Kingdom of God.

Ralph Bonilla was part of that group. **(Have Ralf stand)** I refer to him as my "firstborn" because he was my first spiritual son.

**(Slide 28)** Side of Rafa and me

Back in those days, Ralph may not have had much money, but he was willing to dream with me. He walked those properties with me, prayed with me, and believed with me for what God wanted to do. Looking back, that's a powerful lesson:

God rarely provides for a vision before He gives the vision itself. First, He places a dream in your heart. Then He calls you to believe Him, pray, and take steps of faith. In time, His provision follows His vision.

Never forget vision always precedes provision.

- 1993 — Membership classes established (helped us create stronger foundations)
- 1993 – At a special church event in the city I sat at a table right next to a believer who was also an architect specializing in church building. God is a divine orchestrator!

I remember asking him what it would cost to draw out a picture of the building I imagined for our church expansion. His response took me by surprise. Nothing!

**(Slide 29)** So, after a few meeting he came back with this drawing. (put of the picture) Now the image was no longer just in my head or on the back of a restaurant place mat it was on a professional drawing board.

- **(Slide 30)** 1994 — We broke ground

- 1995 — Construction begins
- 1996 — Expansion completed
- In June of 1996, we had our first service in this location here. (BTW, the first man to be baptized in this baptistry was Brian Scott)
- The church shifted from maintaining to building.

### Three Lessons from the Decade

God Uses Seasons of Preparation (What feels small today may be preparing you for tomorrow)

God Gives Grace in Difficult Transitions (When circumstances change, God remains faithful.)

God Provides for His Vision (Vision always precedes provision)

As we celebrate what God did from 1986 to 1996, may we remember that the same God who prepared, sustained, and guided this church then is still leading us today. Our best days are not behind us if we remain faithful to His mission.