

Chapter 1

God Makes Some Changes in Jim Kennedy

SUPPOSE, BACK IN the 1950s (if you were around then), God had asked you to find someone to lead a worldwide evangelism explosion. You could be excused for not considering Jim Kennedy.

Jim was born November 3, 1930, during his parents' two-week stopover in Augusta, Georgia, on a trip from Jacksonville, Florida to Chicago. He was the second son of a traveling salesman and an alcoholic mother. George Kennedy, Jim's father, was regularly on the road, industriously seeking markets throughout Illinois and as far south as Georgia and Florida. Of Irish extraction, George and Ermine Kennedy were nominal Methodists; in practice, they had no spiritual roots.

"If the Gospel had anything to say about my situation," Jim reflects, "I never got the message."

Yet from age six, young Jim sensed that God had something for him to do. He thought about it often on his walks to and from school in Chicago "It was a feeling," he says, "that I could not explain."

In his early teens, young Kennedy became involved in competitive sports and also joined the Boy Scouts, working his way up to the rank of Star. He became proficient on the clarinet and saxophone. He dreamed of becoming a scientist, preferably an astronomer.

When Jim was 15, the family moved to a suburb on the southern fringe of Tampa, Florida. Across the city, in North Tampa, another transplanted youth, Billy Graham, was beginning his studies at Florida Bible Institute (now Trinity College). But neither knew the other in those days.

By his senior year, Jim's proficiency on the clarinet made him top performer at Henry B. Plant High School. At the annual band concert Jim prepared himself well for his solo in Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." He was unaware that the University of Tampa's music director was in the audience. His flawless execution of the solo won him a full scholarship at the university!

Jim was soon playing first-chair clarinet at the university. As he pursued his degree, he also became involved in other extracurricular activities: rowing, judo, weight lifting, ping pong, dancing, boxing. He liked both music and dancing. When the local Arthur Murray studio placed an ad in the newspaper, Jim, on impulse, responded.

He was hired on the spot as an instructor. "At 25," Jim says, "I was a bona fide swinger!"

Happier on the dance floor than he ever had been during his years at the university, he became expert enough to take first place in Arthur Murray's all-American competition. Predictably, Jim Kennedy moved up the salary scale until he became studio manager of the Tampa franchise.

Still, Jim had no room in his life for church, for God, for the Bible. Worse, his selection of friends steered him into a godless

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lifestyle. “Occasionally I drank. My language was corrupt. I did a little carousing. All in the name of a good time.” Jim looks back on those years with regret and a sense of shame.

A New Applicant Arrives

One breezy Friday evening, Anne Lewis walked into Jim’s dance studio. She wanted to sign up for lessons. For the young manager, it was the proverbial love at first sight! “She was beautiful,” Jim remembers yet. “Petite in size, blue eyes, long dark wavy hair that broke over her shoulders, a captivating smile.” Until that moment, he had hardly given a thought to marriage. But that, too, was about to change!

“I told a fellow instructor, ‘That’s the girl I’m going to marry!’”

Anne Lewis was born in North Carolina, but her veterinarian father soon moved the family to picturesque Lakeland, Florida, just 34 miles from Tampa. Both parents were active in the local Presbyterian Church. Dr. Kenneth R. Lewis was an elder and Anne’s mother was president of the women’s ministry and pastor’s aide.

Anne herself was heavily involved in the same church, singing in the choir, soloing from time to time, working with children. But about one thing she was emphatic: she never wanted to be married to a preacher! “Life in a goldfish bowl is not for me,” she insisted.

Not so surprising, Jim found Anne Lewis to be the most promising dancer he had ever held in his arms. Immediately he signed her up for ten hours of instruction, then for six more months of instruction. Studio rules forbade dating between instructors and their students. But as soon as the course of lessons was finished Jim invited Anne to a picnic with the other

teachers and their friends.

Anne held down a secretarial job by day. But she was also a busy performer in water-ski shows as a water ballerina. And on the weekends, she dated Jim, riding the train between Lakeland and Tampa. “I feel like a commuter!” she said in one of her letters to Jim.

Rather early in their three-and-a-half-year courtship, Anne had a question for Jim.

“Where do you go to church?” she asked.

“Nowhere,” Jim replied. And then, to defend his negligence, “You don’t have to go to church to be a Christian. You can be just as good a Christian without going to church.”

Almost in a whisper, Anne replied, “No you can’t!” Jim was not prepared for her soft-spoken but firm answer.

“I was utterly taken aback,” Jim Kennedy remembers. “I had never been challenged like that before. I was amazed that anyone would have the audacity to say such a thing.”

One Sunday afternoon—sleeping in rather late—with Anne’s gentle assertion still echoing in the remote recesses of his mind, Jim was aroused from a deep sleep by his clock radio. Presbyterian pastor and radio evangelist Donald Grey Barnhouse was on the air.

“He was the last thing I needed in my bedroom,” Jim says. “I got up to tune in some good music. But before I reached the radio, this Presbyterian minister stopped me dead with a question that practically set me back on the edge of my bed.

“In that stentorian voice for which he was famous, Dr. Barnhouse asked: ‘Suppose you were to die today and stand before God and He asked you, “What right do you have to enter my heaven?”—what would you say?’”

In that electrifying moment Jim Kennedy felt totally disarmed. He groped desperately for the answer he did not have.

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The Change Begins

The crucial, dynamic change in Jim Kennedy's life began to take place as he listened intently as Dr. Barnhouse explained God's plan of redemption. He was hearing the Gospel for the first time, praying, confessing his guilt and his need. Suddenly he became curious about the Bible, even though he hadn't the slightest idea where in it to start looking. Above all, he was filled with a strange and wonderful awareness that he had passed from death to life.

There was another influence as well. He visited the corner newsstand and asked the proprietor if he had any religious books.

"Just one," the man said, and handed Jim a copy of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* by Fulton Ousler. Jim paid for the purchase and took the book to his apartment.

"I went home," Jim says, "and read part of the book every night for the next several days. When I finished the book, it seemed as if the cross of Christ had been erected right in my apartment. Now I knew—for the first time—why Christ was suffering there.

"I slipped out of my chair to my knees and asked Christ to come into my heart. I asked Him to forgive me and cleanse me of my sins. From that day on, my life has never been the same. I shall be forever grateful for the radio broadcast of Donald Barnhouse and the book by Fulton Ousler. God used them both to bring me to a saving knowledge of His Son."

Jim Kennedy's insatiable hunger for spiritual nourishment drove him to a fellowship of believers in a neighborhood Presbyterian Church in Tampa. Right away he was drawn to a Bible class comprised of young people who met on Sunday nights. He began to devour massive chunks of Scripture. Within months,

he was asked to teach the class.

Anne noticed the remarkable change in Jim's life. She was delighted to learn he was attending church and teaching a Bible class. As she heard him, over a period of months, retell his testimony again and again, she began to realize that she herself had never come that far. She could see clearly that what she had known was "churchianity," not true Christianity. She wanted the reality she saw in Jim's new faith.

So it happened that the first person God used Jim to lead to Christ was the woman he loved. And Jim began to feel a sense of call growing within him. At first he ignored it. Then he tried to rationalize it away. The dance studio was paying better than ever. Jim's immediate concern was security—self-preservation.

Finally the pressure became unbearable. Late one afternoon, at the end of a busy week, Jim locked himself in his studio office and knelt in desperate prayer. Then he stretched out full-length, face to the floor.

"Lord," he prayed, "do you really want me to quit this job? Are you sure you want to use someone like me?"

Jim had no visions. He heard no voice. But he recalls every detail of the struggle. When he stopped fighting, he got to his feet and picked up the telephone. He could not believe it, but he was calling in his resignation!

But before he could say anything, his boss on the other end of the line informed Jim that he wanted him to take over the Arthur Murray studio in Sarasota as half-owner.

Somehow Jim was able to stammer out, "I'm quitting." When the conversation ended several painful minutes later, Jim found himself without a livelihood. To make matters worse, his once substantial bank balance, which he never bothered to look at, stood at \$13.00. No job, no money, no prospect of support!

Jim turned in his keys and left the studio. He went directly

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to his pastor, who also happened to be chairman of the Presbyterian Home Mission Committee for that area of Florida. Jim's pastor had been impressed by Jim's zeal and teaching ability. He knew of a tiny Presbyterian church located about 20 minutes from Tampa in Clearwater. The church would soon need a pastor.

"Jim," he said, "why don't you go over there and deliver the sermon tomorrow morning at the eleven o'clock service?"

Jim had no reason to decline. Immediately he went to his apartment and began preparing a message. As his text he used Jesus' parable in Matthew 22 about the man who showed up at the king's marriage feast without the required wedding garment. Jim's sermon was a direct outgrowth of his own conversion experience. He could proclaim this text with conviction!

Now that the die was cast, Jim had a proposal to make. It was early December, and the studio gave Jim an unexpected \$300 Christmas bonus. That very afternoon, Jim rushed down to a nearby jewelry store, picked out the best half-carat diamond ring he could afford, and headed in his Pontiac for Lakeland.

Later that evening, Jim drove Anne to scenic Lake Hollingsworth, parked the car, reached into his pocket and presented Anne with the ring and this three-part marriage proposal:

1. I have quit my job at the studio, which means I'm almost flat broke.
2. I am going into the ministry, and I know you always said you didn't want to be a preacher's wife.
3. Will you marry me?

The girl of Jim's dreams accepted, sacrificing her personal desires to place her future, and his, in Divine hands. That

night—December 3, 1955—became a Kennedy date to remember!

When word got out that Jim was actually giving up his lucrative Arthur Murray career to go into the ministry, some of the folks in Lakeland were shocked. In fact, a few even used the word fanatic in describing Jim. But Anne staunchly defended his decision.

Three months later, Anne wrote excitedly to Jim, still in Tampa, saying that she had found the courage to share her Christian testimony for the first time in her life.

“Praise the Lord!” Jim responded. “I prayed that you would have the courage to give your testimony to someone this week . . . Now that you have ‘come all the way out for Christ,’ you will have power that you never had before . . . I pray that the Lord will let you see some conversions soon. Pray, and you’ll have them. Our church deacon raised his hand for salvation. Mrs. Barnum and I prayed for him Monday night. Praise the Lord!”

A Wedding and Ministerial Preparation

Jim Kennedy still needed to resume the long and arduous process of preparation for ministry. Even before quitting the dance studio, he had enrolled that fall in an undergraduate degree program in English. In contrast to his earlier university studies, his As and Bs were not only proof that he had the potential, but testimony of his increasing maturity. Now with his sights set on the ministry, he would need seminary studies as well.

But before seminary, there was the wedding. It took place August 25, 1956, at First Presbyterian Church in Lakeland. The traditional ceremony included Anne’s two sisters as bridesmaids and Jim’s older brother as best man. The happy couple went off on a Riviera honeymoon—not the French Riviera, but

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Riviera, Florida!

Jim had not yet completed his requisite baccalaureate degree in English. But often a seminary permits an applicant to matriculate with the proviso that the seminary degree is conditional on the completion of the undergraduate studies. In Jim Kennedy's case, he would need to return to the University of Tampa for two additional summers.

Columbia Theological Seminary, seven miles east of downtown Atlanta, seemed like a logical choice. It was a Presbyterian school, and the closest denominational school to Jim's home base of Tampa, where he would need to spend two more summers. Also, Atlanta enjoyed a booming economy, offering excellent job possibilities for Anne. Sure enough, Anne was able to sign on as an executive secretary in one of the city's major brokerage houses. It was a position that enabled the two of them to manage during Jim's three years of intensive graduate study at the seminary.

Three weeks after their wedding, Jim and Anne drove to the campus. They found a garage apartment a half mile from the campus that would be "home" to them for the next three years—"The hardest and happiest of our early life together," Anne comments.

Jim immersed himself in his ministerial studies and excelled academically. He enjoyed the campus fellowship and found time to preach in area churches. He and Anne also availed themselves of some of the city's musical and cultural offerings. The three years passed swiftly. Jim graduated from Columbia cum laude, winning one of four scholarships that he would make use of later.

As the end of seminary approached, Jim gave serious consideration to what lay beyond. He did not feel a specific call to foreign missionary work, but a sermon on the subject convinced

him he should at least offer. So he applied to the World Mission Committee as a candidate for what is now Zaire (then Belgium Congo). Anne was totally supportive of her husband, whatever God's will turned out to be.

Two weeks before graduation, Jim had heard nothing from the World Mission Committee. Although by then the most desirable pulpits were spoken for, Jim was advised to send out letters to the stated clerks of five Presbyteries. His letters brought a single response. The Home Mission Committee of the Everglades Presbytery was hoping to organize a new church in the underdeveloped northern sector of Ft. Lauderdale. Jim was welcome to come down and look over the situation.

Jim went. There was not a whole lot to encourage the prospective minister. No building. No budget. No organization. Not even a congregation! A sign on a sandy piece of ground on 50th Street announced to the few pedestrians and motorists venturing out that far from town: "Presbyterian Church to Be Built on This Site." Today 50th Street has been renamed Commercial Boulevard.

In all directions Jim could see only barren space, plenty of weeds, but no people and almost no houses.

"Looks like a good place to begin a church for field mice," Jim commented, not altogether facetiously. "And where does the congregation presently meet?"

"In the small cafetorium of McNab Elementary School just across the town line in Pompano Beach," his host explained.

What to do? There was still no word on his missionary application for Belgium Congo. Meanwhile, Jim was anxious to get to work. Would Ft. Lauderdale be interested in his serving on an interim basis? They would. Jim accepted the schoolhouse church offer on that condition, to begin right after his graduation.

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Church Planters in Ft. Lauderdale

The Kennedys arrived in Ft. Lauderdale early in June. They took two rooms in a motel on Highway A1A, right down on the tourist-crowded beach. In one room they stored their household belongings. In the other they lived. That motel became home to them for the next six months.

The first order of business was to get things ready for the Sunday morning worship service. A small but attractive stage had been built at one end of the cafetorium. Around a veteran piano, Anne began to build a music program. And in that setting the two of them began their Ft. Lauderdale ministry June 21, 1959.

Jim Kennedy waited three more months for the verdict from the World Mission Committee. A disqualifying asthmatic condition had shown up in the course of Jim's physical exam. He would not be going to Central Africa. By the time the report reached them, the Kennedys were totally immersed in their Ft. Lauderdale ministry. They had given missions a serious look. Now it was time to sink their roots in Ft. Lauderdale. The thought of seeking some other place of service never really crossed their minds.

Under the hard work and enthusiastic direction of Jim and Anne Kennedy, the infant church seemed bound to show immediate and rapid growth.

But it didn't.

Attendance, instead of climbing up past the 50-mark, began an unexplainable decline. As the months passed, the decline worsened. The Kennedys worked harder, but the heart-wrenching plunge continued. At the end of ten months, the original attendance of about 45 each Sunday stood at an abysmal 17!

"Extrapolation made it clear," Jim calculated, "that I had

two and a half months of ministry left before I was preaching to only my wife—who was threatening to go to the Baptist church down the street!”

Jim knew that something wasn't working the way it was supposed to. Suddenly he put his finger on it. It had to be, of all things, his “invitation” at the end of each sermon to “slip up your hand” or “stand up” or “come forward” to make a public profession of faith in Christ. Worshippers who came from New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio were extremely uncomfortable with this time-tested procedure in the South. If simple invitations couldn't be relied on to build up the numbers, what else? Home visitation certainly was essential, and Jim was pressing it vigorously, yet neither was that approach producing the desired numbers.

Then when Jim was at the very lowest point of his ministry, a letter providentially arrived from a fellow minister whom he had come to know while in Atlanta. Kennedy Smartt wanted Jim to come to his Presbyterian church in Scottdale, Georgia, to conduct a ten-day series of evangelistic services.

“Can you believe that?” Jim asks with amazement. “I, who had just decimated one church was being asked to ship my technique across state lines. ‘Have plague—will travel!’”

Nevertheless, Jim Kennedy agreed to go. When he arrived in Scottdale, his host met him with disconcerting news. “In addition to the nightly sermons,” the minister announced, “we will be going out every morning, and every afternoon, and sometimes at night after the services. You're going to have an opportunity to witness to these people eyeball-to-eyeball and toenail-to-toenail.” He added, “I've saved all the tough ones for you!”

“I was trapped,” remembers Jim Kennedy. “I didn't know how to witness to anyone.” In his room, he got down on his face before God and prayed for hours. “Lord, You've got to help me!

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I don't know what to do!"

True to his promise, Kennedy Smartt arrived the next morning to take Jim Kennedy witnessing.

The very first encounter had all the makings of a disaster. Then, suddenly, Jim realized what the problem was. "Clearly," Jim declares, "this man was non-elect." But Jim's pastor friend came to a different conclusion: Jim was clearly a non-evangelist. Taking over the conversation, the older minister, in no more than 15 minutes, had the man on his knees receiving Christ into his life. "It was a very traumatic experience for this budding young theologian," Jim Kennedy admits. "Here was a 'non-elect' converted right before my very eyes!"

During those ten days of meetings, some 54 people came forward. "And," Jim adds, "I could have told you who would be coming forward, because I had seen that pastor lead them to Christ during the week!"

"How did you learn to do this?" Jim asked his host.

"In our crusade last year," the minister replied, "we really had an evangelist. He took me out with him. I learned by watching him."

Evangelism Explosion Is Born

Jim was an apt pupil. He returned to Ft. Lauderdale a changed person. And what he had seen his minister friend do in Scottdale, Georgia, he began to do in Ft. Lauderdale. Jim began to witness to everyone, and the people in Ft. Lauderdale responded as they had responded in Scottdale.

"After about a year," Jim says, "taking my wife Anne with me—not so much to train her, but because I rarely got to spend time with her—I stopped long enough to remind myself, 'There are a limited number of people I can reach alone. Why not train

others to do the same thing?’ So I took a man out with me—an elderly man who had been a Christian for about 60 years. He always wanted to lead someone to the Lord, but never knew how. I took him out for months. Finally I ‘pushed him out of the nest.’ He began to lead a number of people to Christ.

“There was another man whom I took out for a month or so. I went away on vacation, and he called me up the next week and told me he had led someone to Christ. I prayed, ‘Lord, maybe this is it. Maybe this is the way.’”

In fact, Jim Kennedy concluded that this is the way. “It is what Jesus did. Jesus called His disciples to be with Him so He could show them how to lead others to Him.”

As Jim Kennedy put into practice in Ft. Lauderdale what he had seen and tried in Atlanta, people were led into the Kingdom of God and new members joined the little church in the McNab Elementary School. The pain of the downward spiral was forgotten as attendance spurted from 17 to 66—more than enough to charter a fully-organized church.

The following year the charter total almost doubled to a healthy congregation of 122. The little cafetorium was beginning to give them seating problems. The newly finished Kennedy home became virtually “the church,” except for Sunday mornings. Anne quickly became proficient in setting up and putting away folding chairs twice a week for evening services on the terrazzo patio. Her mother, back in Lakeland, generously shipped the family piano to meet the need in the new house on 19th Avenue.

Jim Kennedy had found the answer, but the remarkable results led to a new question about how much one man can do. He pondered the possibilities for a long while as he continued to bring new converts into the fold, one at a time. Then, like a bolt of lightning, it hit him. What he needed to do, he realized,

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was not just to win people to Christ; he needed to train people to win people to Christ. The Bible calls it “equipping the saints” by transferring to them the techniques that work.

“What the church must do,” Jim says, “is to get the process of spiritual multiplication going on a worldwide scale. We can do this by training witnesses to train witnesses. That was the way the original witnesses in their day turned the world upside down.”

Convinced the church faces the “evangelize or fossilize” alternatives, Jim made the requirement of witness-training a bedrock essential of his ministry. The first effort at training witnesses consisted of a series of classes. Then the trainees were sent out into the community to “try their wings.” The results were absolute zero. Even a 25-week training session accomplished no tangible results.

After much prayer and thought, another friendly bolt of lightning struck. “Take your trainees out of the classrooms into the living rooms.” The one indispensable ingredient he had overlooked was on-the-job training. Only as the would-be witness goes out with an experienced trainer to observe and then participate does the training really work. Ultimately, that trainee becomes part of the training team, teaching other newcomers how to do it.

It was that simple. Yet it appeared that no one was doing it in an organized, structured way. Jim Kennedy knew that such a training ministry would literally explode the growth patterns of churches, once it was faithfully and intelligently put in practice.

Jim had been a witness to the population explosion—the post-World War II baby boom in America and around the globe. Suddenly the perfect title to his new ministry came to mind. “Evangelism Explosion” describes not the detonation of dynamite but the multiplication of people coming to Christ

through the multiplication of trained witnesses empowered by God's Spirit.

It's what had happened in the McNab Elementary School cafetorium. Sunday attendance in excess of 200 packed the place out. It was time to begin planning for the building over on Commercial Boulevard that the Presbytery of the Everglades had set aside for the future Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church.

His life and ministry radically changed, Jim Kennedy now knew he had found the biblical strategy for impacting Ft. Lauderdale, America, and ultimately the world!