

WOW, WHAT A RIDE

Dubby and Cindy Reflect on River of Life: March 1996–Sept. 2026

For more than thirty years, River of Life has been woven into the story of our lives. From its beginning in March 1996 through the conclusion of our congregational pastoral ministry in September 2026, we have had the privilege of walking alongside extraordinary people through seasons of faith, growth, celebration, loss, questions, and change. As we look back, we are deeply grateful—not simply for what we were able to do, but for all God has taught us along the way. The reflections below share some of the moments, lessons, and convictions that shaped River of Life and shaped us. Together, they tell the story of a ministry that was never really about a building or an organization, but about loving God, loving people, and following Him wherever He led.

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Reflections of the stories that formed our foundation

People often ask what makes River of Life different. That's never been an easy question to answer, because the answer isn't found in a ministry model, a statement of faith, or even our history. It's found in the many ways God has quietly shaped our hearts over the years.

Like every follower of Christ, we have grown in understanding through experience. Some lessons came through seasons of joy. Others came through disappointment, difficult

questions, unexpected opportunities, and moments when God gently corrected our thinking.

Looking back, we can see that each of those experiences became part of the foundation on which River of Life was built. The stories on this page are some of those defining moments. They aren't meant to explain everything we believe. Instead, they tell the story of how God patiently shaped the convictions that guide our ministry today. As you read, we hope that you won't simply learn more about River of Life — you will discover something about the heart of God.

I Love Them Too

Every ministry has moments that quietly shape its heart. They are rarely dramatic at the time, but years later you realize that everything that followed can be traced back to one conversation, one experience, or one gentle whisper from God.

For me, one of those defining moments came during my years in seminary. As I continued my studies, I was introduced to a much deeper way of reading and understanding Scripture. I learned to study passages in their historical and cultural context rather than simply relying on how I had always heard them explained.

That process was both exciting and humbling. Little by little, I realized that some of the beliefs I had held most confidently were not as firmly grounded in Scripture as I had once assumed. Many of them had been shaped by sincere

teachers, faithful traditions, and the church culture in which I had grown up. I wasn't rejecting my past; I was allowing God's Word to challenge me to keep learning.

As my understanding developed, our ministry naturally began to change. Some people welcomed those changes, but others became concerned. Friends who had faithfully walked beside us for years wondered whether we had lost our way. Some questioned our direction. Others quietly stepped away.

Those seasons were painful, because these weren't people we argued with from a distance. They were people we loved deeply — people with whom we had shared life, ministry, and countless memories.

One day I found myself pouring all of that hurt out to God. I wanted Him to understand how misunderstood I felt. If I'd be completely honest, I was hoping He would reassure me that I was right and everyone else was wrong. Instead, He answered me with four simple words that have stayed with me ever since. "I Love Them Too"

Those words stopped me in my tracks. Almost immediately, I realized that many of the people who disagreed with me were not trying to resist God at all. They were trying to honor Him. They were protecting something they sincerely believed was important.

Their desire, just like mine, was to help people know and follow Christ. We had reached different conclusions on some issues, but our hearts were often seeking the same Lord.

As I reflected on that experience, I found myself thinking about Paul's words in Philippians. He acknowledged that not everyone preached Christ from the same motives, yet he rejoiced because Christ was being proclaimed.

That passage reminded me that while truth matters deeply, humility matters too. We can hold our convictions with confidence while still recognizing that God is at work in people whose perspectives differ from our own.

Over time, those four words began reaching far beyond theological differences. Whenever I met someone struggling with addiction, living with mental illness, carrying deep shame, making destructive choices, or simply trying to find their way through the brokenness of life, I found myself remembering God's gentle reminder: "I love them too."

Life is messy because people are messy. None of us escapes the human condition this side of heaven. The longer I walk with Christ, the less interested I become in deciding who belongs in God's family, and the more interested I become in loving the people He already loves. Those four words have quietly become one of the deepest convictions of River of Life. They remind us to approach people with humility rather than superiority, with curiosity rather than assumptions, and with compassion rather than condemnation. Before we notice someone's opinions, politics, theology, struggles, or mistakes, God sees a person created in His image and deeply loved by Him. God constantly reminds us: "I love them too."

Come to the Waters

Some of the most important moments in ministry do not happen in church buildings. They happen during quiet conversations when God begins shaping your heart long before He shapes your ministry. Here is one of those moments for Dubby and me.

A few years earlier, we had stepped away from serving as associate pastors. I had begun seminary, and during my first full year of classes, we felt God leading us to get away for a weekend simply to pray, listen, and talk about what ministry might look like if He ever called us to lead again.

It turned out to be quite an adventure. A snowstorm followed us almost the entire trip. What normally would have been a comfortable drive stretched into nearly eight hours. By the time we arrived, most people had stayed home because of the weather, leaving us with an unexpected gift — time. Time to pray. Time to dream. Time to ask God what kind of ministry He wanted us to build.

On Sunday morning, we attended a large church in the area. The worship was beautiful, the message was encouraging, and God's presence was evident throughout the service. As the service came to a close, the focus shifted to a building campaign. The congregation was reminded of their financial commitments, and there was concern that many had not been able to fulfill their pledges.

As I listened, my heart became heavy. I couldn't stop thinking about the people sitting in those pews. I wondered how many had lost jobs since making those commitments. How many had faced unexpected medical bills, family crises, or other hardships they never could have anticipated. I imagined faithful people sitting there feeling as though they had somehow disappointed God because life had changed and they could no longer give what they had once hoped to give.

In that moment, God began planting something in my heart that has remained with me ever since. I wanted River of Life to be a place where people could simply come. A place where they could receive without feeling

pressure. A place where grace was never measured by a financial transaction. A place where people knew they were welcome whether they gave a great deal, a little, or nothing at all.

Not because generosity isn't important — it is. Scripture consistently teaches us to live generously. But I have also come to believe that generosity is larger than a church offering. Sometimes it looks like supporting your local church. Sometimes it looks like paying for a neighbor's groceries, helping a family member with rent, caring for aging parents, or quietly meeting a need that only you know exists.

I have always taught tithing and generous stewardship. I also believe those gifts should flow from a willing heart that is listening to God rather than from guilt, fear, or pressure. Our desire has always been to keep River of Life simple enough that people have the freedom to respond generously wherever God leads them.

Not long after that weekend, Isaiah 55 became the foundation of our ministry: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!... Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good..." (Isaiah 55:1–2).

Those words captured everything we hoped River of Life would become — an open invitation. Come if you are thirsty. Come if you are weary. Come if you are searching. Come if you are struggling. Come if you are growing. Come just as you are. The invitation has never depended on what someone could bring. It has always depended on the generosity of God. We simply want to be a place where people can come to the waters and discover that God's grace has always been free.

The Church Without Walls

God sometimes plants a single thought in our hearts years before we understand what it means. I experienced one of these moments in March of 1993.

After serving as a youth pastor and an associate pastor since 1986, I preached my final message, said my goodbyes, and slowly pulled out of the church parking lot. It was the closing of an important chapter. That church had given us so much. It was there that Dubby and I learned, served, grew, and were given countless opportunities to develop as leaders. We will always be grateful for that foundation, because God used it to prepare us for everything that would come next.

As I drove away that day, I remember asking a simple question: "God, what is next?" His answer came quietly, but it has stayed with me ever since.

"I have called you to pastor the church without walls."

At the time, I was not entirely sure what those words meant. Over the years, I tried to understand them as our ministry unfolded. There were seasons of serving in traditional and non-traditional church settings, seasons of counseling, writing, teaching, business leadership, and walking alongside people through some of the hardest moments of their lives. Some chapters looked very conventional. Others looked nothing like the ministry I had imagined when I first entered seminary.

But as I look back now, I can clearly see the pattern. The majority of the ministry God entrusted to us happened outside the walls of a church building. It happened around kitchen tables and hospital beds. In businesses and counseling offices. Over coffee with someone asking honest questions. Walking beside families in crisis. Encouraging people who had stopped attending church but had never stopped searching for God. Praying with

neighbors. Listening more than speaking. Simply showing up when someone needed to know they were not alone.

Slowly, I realized that God had been answering my question all those years earlier. The Church has never been limited to a building. The Church has always been the people of God carrying His love into the places where life actually happens.

We are grateful for church buildings. They have played an important role throughout Christian history, and they continue to be places where lives are changed every day. But we also believe the Church is at its best when what happens inside the gathering naturally flows into everyday life. Our prayer has never been to build a larger organization. Our prayer has been to help people become the Church wherever God has placed them.

That has always been our heart: to follow the Good Shepherd wherever He leads. To leave the ninety-nine when He calls us to seek the one. To be present in the places where people are hurting, searching, celebrating, growing, and simply living their everyday lives. Because ministry has never been about where we meet. It has always been about Who we follow. And wherever He leads — that is where we want to be.

Calling lived Step by Step

From 1987 until March 1993, I served in vocational ministry. When we planted River of Life in 1996, we made a decision that surprised many people. Rather than returning to full-time vocational ministry, we intentionally chose to remain bi-vocational. Over the years, that eventually became multi-vocational as Dubby and I started businesses, worked alongside employees, served customers, partnered with vendors, and built organizations together.

Somewhere along the way, I came to understand calling differently than I once had. Calling is not a title, and it is not something performed on a stage. It is the work God created you to do, discovered step by step as you follow His direction through the ordinary places of your life. That is the heart of being a multi-vocational minister.

Looking back, I would not change that decision for anything. We discovered that God was not asking us to choose between ministry and business. He was inviting us to bring ministry into business.

Some of the most meaningful conversations about faith never happened from behind a pulpit. They happened in an office, on a job site, during a lunch break, in a staff meeting, or while helping someone navigate a difficult season of life. We learned that honoring God in business was not separate from ministry — it was ministry. The workplace became one of the greatest mission fields God ever entrusted to us.

It also kept us connected to the everyday realities people were facing. We understood the pressure of meeting payroll, managing employees, caring for customers, balancing family responsibilities, and trying to honor God while living in a busy world. Those experiences helped us teach from a place of shared experience rather than distant observation.

Perhaps most importantly, remaining multi-vocational shaped the kind of church River of Life became. We knew what it felt like to work long hours and still want to invest in our families. Because we were living that same rhythm ourselves, we wanted River of Life to encourage people rather than overwhelm them. We have always believed that following Jesus should strengthen family life, not compete with it. The Church exists to equip people for everyday life, not to consume every available hour they have.

For us, ministry has never been confined to church meetings. It has happened around conference tables and kitchen tables. In churches and businesses. With neighbors, employees, customers, and friends. Wherever God places His people, there is an opportunity to love well, serve faithfully, and reflect His character. Calling was never meant to be lived on a stage. It is lived step by step, in the everyday places God has entrusted to us, and looking back now, we can see it was part of His design all along. And one day, like Jesus, we long to say to the Father, "I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave me to do" (John 17:4).

God Does Not Make Junk

Some convictions develop slowly over time. Others seem to grow stronger with every person you meet. This has become one of those convictions for me.

Throughout the years at River of Life, I have had the privilege of walking alongside thousands of people. Some came through church services. Others came through counseling, retreats, community events, Bible studies, coffee conversations, or simply unexpected encounters along the way. Their stories were all different, but one thing remained remarkably consistent: almost everyone underestimated their own worth.

Some carried shame from past mistakes. Some believed they had failed too many times for God to use them. Some measured their value by their accomplishments, their relationships, or what others thought about them. Others had simply lived so long with criticism that they could no longer recognize the goodness God had placed within them.

Before long, I found myself praying a simple prayer whenever I met someone new: "God, help me see them from where You stand." That prayer changed the way I looked at people. Instead of seeing their mistakes, I began looking for the treasures God had placed within them. Instead of focusing on what was broken, I asked God to help me recognize what He had created. Instead of

asking what was wrong with someone, I began asking what was beautiful that had simply become hidden beneath pain, disappointment, fear, or the circumstances of life.

The more I prayed that prayer, the more convinced I became that every person carries immeasurable worth, because every person bears the image of their Creator. That conviction eventually became the foundation for a series of books: *God Made You, and He Does Not Make Junk*; *God Made Them, and He Does Not Make Junk*; and *God Made Us, and He Does Not Make Junk*.

Those books were not written simply to help people feel better about themselves. They were written to help people see themselves through the eyes of God. Scripture tells us that humanity was created in the image of God, and that when He finished His creation, He called it very good. That does not mean we never struggle, or that sin has not affected our lives. It means our value has always been rooted in the One who created us, not in the circumstances that have shaped us.

I have come to believe that one of the greatest barriers to spiritual growth is not that people doubt God loves them. It is that they struggle to believe they are worthy of receiving that love. When we begin seeing ourselves as God sees us, something begins to change. Hope grows. Shame loses its grip. Healing becomes possible. Purpose begins to emerge. And we become much more willing to extend that same compassion to the people around us.

That conviction continues to shape the heart of River of Life today. Every person who walks into our lives is someone intentionally created by God. Every person has gifts waiting to be discovered. Every person has dignity that deserves to be honored. Every person has a story that matters. Because our Creator is good, and God does not make junk.

