

# Trailblazing pastor

**Dan Estes believes middle age is a great time to return to church planting**

By John W. Kennedy in Indianapolis  
Photos by Paul M. Walsh

**A**fter 16½ years, Dan R. Estes had grown to love the members of Living Hope Church in Merrillville, Ind. He led an established congregation of 550 adherents that had more than doubled in size since his arrival. He supervised a staff of 37, most of whom worked for the day-care center the church operated. During his tenure, Living Hope hadn't experienced any splits over leadership, worship style, finances or other issues.

But Estes had grown a little too comfortable.

"I felt I had become the keeper of the aquarium rather than a fisher of men," Estes says.

By middle age, many pastors are simultaneously looking back wistfully at their careers and carefully planning ahead for retirement. Dan Estes instead set out to find a location where Christ needed to be proclaimed. He found it in Lawrence, a city on the east edge of Indianapolis with more than 60,000 residents and no Assemblies of God church.

Today, a little more than a month from his 56th birthday, Dan Estes has embraced the bivocational life he left behind a quarter century ago. He is a church planter — and a full-time car salesman.

In order to support his family, by day Estes is a preferred customer manager at an auto dealership, able to communicate with congregants via his BlackBerry at a moment's notice. During the evenings and on weekends he's typing church bulletins, visiting the sick in hospitals, writing sermons and preparing a worship music set.

Sharon, his wife of 35 years, is an English teacher at a local community college as well as the church secretary, janitor and keyboardist.

At a time in life when most people are trying to minimize risk, Estes is living proof that middle age isn't too late to go out on a limb and pursue a ministry challenge.

"If you're not afraid to start over, this can be fun," Estes says. Striking out on his own with no support from a mother church, Estes planted a new Living Hope Church on the edge of Indianapolis a couple



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of years ago. He and Sharon accessed the money they had set aside for retirement, and those funds are helping as they pioneer the new congregation. They left their home in suburban Chicago for more modest digs in suburban Indianapolis.

The move has meant both sacrifice and stretching. In Merrillville, Living Hope had excellent musicians and singers. At the church plant, Estes is the worship leader and sole guitarist. He's learned how to be computer savvy. He even helps clean toilets in Living Hope's restrooms.

Around 60 people attend Living Hope. Although a few have been in a pew every Sunday for decades, most have never attended church, or at least not been in a sanctuary for a long time.

"My target is people who are sleeping in on Sunday morning," Estes says.

A month ago, Living Hope moved

into its own building, after nearly two years of renting facilities from another Pentecostal church nearby. But even more than improved facilities, Estes is passionate about transformed souls.

"I want to see people change on their journey with Christ," he says. "Sometimes that involves baby steps. I don't want to lose anyone on the way."

Estes knows from experience the Christian walk is a process. His parents divorced when Estes was 4. By age 17, living with his mother and third stepfather, Estes looked forward to getting away from his Louisville, Ky., home and going to college. As a senior in high school he already had landed a job with an architectural firm and saw that profession as his ticket to a better life.

He also had another obsession: a 1963 Oldsmobile Cutlass with bucket seats. His sister Pat Walters, then 31, promised to co-sign on a car loan if he would come to church with her. On his third Sunday attending, Estes made a salvation commitment to Jesus.

Despite his architecture desire and skills, Estes opted to attend Central Bible College in Springfield, Mo., for a year to start learning about Scripture. He figured the Lord would bless his architecture career if he made such a sacrifice. However, that year in school changed his thinking. He stayed at CBC for four years.

Upon graduation, Estes, at 22, planted a church in Richmond, Ky., and left five years later. By then the congregation had grown to

175. Later he pioneered a church in Paducah, Ky., that attracted 75 congregants in his two years there.

After pastoring a couple of other churches, Estes settled in for the lengthy stretch in Merrillville. When he arrived, the tight church budget didn't even allow for the purchase of postage stamps. When he left, members donated \$100,000 annually to missions.

"We loved the people a lot, but we thought it was time to leave," Estes says. "The only logical thing seemed to be to start a new church."

Of course, it's a bittersweet experience to leave behind parishioners whose faith has been strengthened, babies who have grown to teenagers, a worship team (including Sharon) that recorded a compact disc, and a full-time youth pastor who had befriended 17-year-old son Daniel. In addition, the couple's 28-year-old daughter Ashley Monroe, her husband, Sean, and their 8-month old son, Aidan, still attend Living Hope in Merrillville, 150 miles away.

But if anyone can plant a church in the wake of such an upheaval, it's Estes, who obtained his master's degree from Assemblies of God Theological Seminary in Springfield, Mo., in 2004. He is jovial yet sincere; tenderhearted but frank; well educated though still in tune with common folks; full of dry humor yet serious when driving home a biblical point in a sermon.

The seasoned shepherd knows the personal touch is key to making newcomers feel welcome. A simple breakfast is served before the Sunday morning service. Children get to pick candy from a box as they are dismissed following worship. Before and after the meeting Estes inquires how various congregants' jobs are going.

If anyone misses a Sunday service he is quick with a follow-up phone call. He sends handwritten birthday greetings to attendees.

While building relationships is important, Estes also realizes lay-people must take ownership of lay ministry if the church is going to make it.

Teresa Lonas has been with Living Hope from the beginning, even though she hadn't stepped inside a church for the previous eight years.

"Living Hope clicked because I felt a sense of being needed," Lonas says. "There's a belief that we're building something together."

Lonas credits Sharon Estes with mentoring her. "She has such a sweet personality. She's transparent, and she's a wonderful listener," Lonas says of the pastor's wife.

She also has learned about integrity while listening to Estes preach. Earlier this year she left an office manager job she had held for 12 years. Estes had suggested she read Charles M. Sheldon's inspirational classic *In His Steps*. The discipleship book spurred Lonas to conclude she could no longer support the company's business practices.

Lonas, 43, now has a lower-paying job and longer commute, but she has peace of mind. "Dan has taught me a lot about being a Christian," says Lonas, who sings on the praise team and is an elementary Sunday School teacher.

Luann Mueller, 45, stopped attending church as a teenager and considered herself an atheist. But she drove down the street one day six months after the church opened and felt drawn by the Living Hope sign, which declares: "At LHC, Everyone Matters ... Everyone!"

When smiling Sharon Estes greeted Mueller as she came through the door, it began a path to her walk with Jesus.

Now Mueller is an exuberant worshipper herself, and Dan Estes quickly asked her to sing on the praise team. "I'd only been here three weeks and he heard me singing 'Victory in Jesus' real loud," Mueller says. "Pastor is good about

getting people involved."

The church isn't growing as fast as Estes wanted or expected. Part of the problem, he believes, is the previous location on a less-traveled road. The new site is on a major thoroughfare. Also, construction is symbolic of permanence, he says.

"When you purchase property it gives a sense of cohesion and credibility," Estes says. "People no longer see you as just a rental church. It's just a matter of time before we grow."

The new property is situated on 4½ acres. The initial building seats 100, but Estes has a timetable for growth and eventually believes the church will grow to 400, at which time a daughter congregation will be planted. By then Estes will be a full-time pastor, no longer selling vehicles.

God — and Assemblies of God partnerships — have honored Estes' leap of faith. The Indiana District provided start-up costs. Various congregations around the Hoosier State helped raise the \$60,000 down payment for the property. AG Financial Solutions made a special loan package available. U.S. Missions Executive Director Alton Garrison sent word the church would be the recipient of a \$100,000 gift (\$50,000 from the General Council and \$50,000 from the ReachAmerica Coalition).

"I will never forget that day," Estes says. "Without this gift I do not believe we would be able to build as promptly as we have done. While my family may have stepped out of our comfort zone, those in our Fellowship have provided great help and encouragement along the way."

Estes has assured attendees he is staying for the long haul.

"I don't think about retirement and I have no intention of going anywhere else," Estes says. "This is going to be a great church." **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).



Dan Estes is leading worship and raising building funds for the first time since his early ministry. Wife Sharon is the keyboard player at Living Hope Church in Indianapolis.



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