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Global 2016: Covenant Life Interview with Bo and Nancy, PJ and Ashleigh

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Rigby Wallace interviews PJ & Ashleigh, and Bo & Nancy around the Smyths transition into leading Covenant Life Church in the Greater DC area.

Rigby Wallace

Most of us are aware that the Smyth's are on their way, waiting for visa issues to come through, but they are on their way to serve in an amazing community called Covenant Life in Maryland just outside Washington, D.C. That have been invited by the elders there to come and take up the lead elder role and it has been a fantastic process to be a part of.

Steve and Anna [van Rhyn], Sue and I have journeyed with P.J. and Ash over the last couple of years and we have watched something of this amazing choreography of the Holy Spirit. It is a beautiful thing. You can't be a student of the Book of Acts and not see massive people movements. It is not strange to biblical missional culture, but it is strange to our humanity; it is something we still have to contend with, we have to find grace for.

I love the story of Pricilla and Aquilla moving east from Rome after Claudius boots them out. And then at almost the same time you got the move of Paul from Athens to Corinth. There's the sense in which these relationships find each other in a fantastic new missional partnership and a church is born, or is put on steroids in a wonderful way.

What we want to invite you into is something of that story. Some of us have been on the inside track and we don't want to make that kind of secret or exclusive. We want everybody to dial into the story of how P.J. and Ash have processed this sense of God opening a door in Covenant Life. And we have also got Bo and Nancy Lotinsky, who we are just getting to know. ... I want to invite these two couples to come up here and I am going to in a gentle, loving way interview them. And I want us to lean into this and capture something of this narrative, of this story.

Let me frame this for the sake of this interview, this is not about Advance, not about finding a beachhead into America. I really want to ask us to suspend that. It is about our mates here, our new friends in America, and a church that over a period of time has taken some major hits. Bo is the Chairman of the Elder's Board at Covenant Life. We've already had Mark and Terry Mitchell in the South African sort of national Advance gathering. And it has been a fantastic kind of just window in this. Nothing is being primed other than we want to invite them to tell the story. And I am going to start with you P.J. Did

you see it coming? And tells us about the human, the spiritual and leave family for now. Let's listen in. 4:32

[Note: I met with Pat Ennis for five hours, five months before this interview. Pat headed up the Search Team that highly recommended P.J. as lead pastor to the pastors. Pat told me P.J. was "head and shoulders above everyone else as a preacher" and "will be able to fill the auditorium." He also told me, P.J. would buy the vacated 17,000 square foot space from SGM on the bottom floor of CLC, join Advance in the future, and use CLC as a base [i.e., "beachhead"] to plant churches in USA. This plan was concealed from CLC members because many would have opposed being part of a larger organization similar to SGM.]

P.J. Smyth

Did we see it coming? Yes and no. We thought after 10 or 11 years of GodFirst [in Johannesburg, South Africa] and GodFirst transitioning to autonomous churches, and me stepping out of leadership there to give Advance a bit of a 2 to 3 year boost of my primary energies. We suspected that if Jesus hadn't returned or taken us home at the end of those 2 to 3 years that we would have another local church assignment for us. And we kind of course, we've had the privilege of serving and leading local churches there. And so we expected there would be another kind of assignment but weren't sure where it should be. Would it be somewhere else in South Africa? Would it be Mauritius which has long been on our heart. We just feel for the nation of Mauritius. And the Seychelles as well actually. And the Maldives. So many people groups that need Jesus. [laughter]

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We have family in Australia but we just never felt intuitively that is where we should be. Our strongest suspicion was that would be here in this amazing nation – the British Isles. I have got lots of family here. Ash has family here. I have heritage. So many connections. Brothers and sisters, who we just love. So that was just the expectation, but we would always tag on to end of our prayer, Lord we are open to serve you anywhere. Lord, if it is the UK please open a clear door there. And if it is anywhere else like America, well of course we are open to you and we were a bit open. We just prayed that as a bit of obedience because we really do, you know wanted to keep our hearts open to the Lord.

And about a year into this 2 to 3 years stint of me doing Advance fulltime, we came across Covenant Life Church. It was through Steve van Rhyn, who is a great friend of mine. He said to me, we were starting to meet in December, 18 months ago, he said (we were talking about the UK and the US), "I can't really see you in the USA unless it was at a church like Covenant Life." I said, "Who's that?" He said, "You know C.J., Josh's church." "Oh, I don't really know." I said, "Why?" He said, "It is a church with similar

values and it is East Coast, so you can stay in touch with Africa and Europe and it is big city. I know you like big cities." And that was that.

A month later [January 2015], Josh Harris who led Covenant Life for ten years resigned. Steve [van Rhyn] calls and he actually spoke to Steve and Jenn because he couldn't get me. He said, "Have you heard Josh has resigned." And he said, "Josh who? Oh, that church."

Steve [van Rhyn] was actually bold enough to say, "Bro, I think this might be God." [i.e., Joshua's resignation opened the door for P.J.]. And we just made a little pact there and then on the phone, we are not going to talk to anyone else about this. My heart wasn't beating fast. I wasn't excited. Nothing but just Lord if this is you we pray this would come, the job [lead pastor at CLC] would come to me. We agreed we would not send out CDs [of messages] to anybody. We would just allow the Lord to be Lord and remarkably two months towards the end of March, Josh Harris who hadn't chatted to Terry [Virgo] for four or five years, reached out to Terry and just said any ideas for an interim pastor. Josh was trying to help the process. And Terry said I will get back to you. And he got in touch with me and then put Josh in touch with me. And then conversation started. And then over the last nine months of last year [Apr.-Dec. 2015], was a case of Covenant Life and us getting to know each other. And both parties, gradually, increasingly felt the Lord has led us to each other.

Rigby Wallace

So that is kind of from the Smyths. Covenant Life, Bo would you give us a little bit of your side in a God honoring way around some of the very painful history you guys have walked through and something of how you began to connect the dots and sense that God could be in the P.J. relocation to Covenant Life.

Bo Lotinsky:

Thank you for having us come. ... If God wasn't good enough in just bringing us here to this wonderful conference, he adds to that as a loving Father because this is the 30th anniversary of me coming here to the UK for the very first time [1986] and it was to attend the Down's Bible Week and that is where I met C.J. I did that. I can't believe I said that. We have jar in our elders' meeting if you say, if you use the wrong name [C.J. instead of P.J.], you have to put a dollar in the jar. So I am going to have to go back and do that. This is where I met Terry [Virgo] and Nigel [Ring] for the first time and so to see them here is just an incredible blessing. And yes, time does fly very fast.

So just really quick. Nancy and I, we were a part of the church, I was an elder in the church [Indiana Christian Fellowship in Indiana, PA] that was first adopted by Sovereign Grace Ministries many, many years ago [1981]. Then we were asked to move, to relocate to Covenant Life Church where Sovereign Grace was based, aka PDI Ministries, aka People of Destiny International. And I served in ministry for 27 years [1981-2008] but

that came to a very disillusioning end [Bo was unjustly terminated by C.J. Mahaney]. That was a very, very difficult time for us but my wife was actually very happy that it came to an end. So there is a story there. But for anyone who has been in that situation, you can understand the temptation that you feel, the temptation to move on but God spoke very clearly, very clearly, that we were to stay [at CLC], and it wasn't easy, but God's grace is sufficient, so we stayed.

A few years after that [in 2011], that's where the difficulties for Covenant Life Church and Sovereign Grace [Ministries], which was based there at the church at the time, underwent a great difficulty [when I sent out *The Documents*, etc.] that went on for years. Initially, the first serious trial was that long-standing relationship came to a very difficult end [C.J. angrily and abruptly left CLC in August 2012. Then CLC left SGM in December 2012]. The church is coming up on its 40th anniversary [1978-2017]. So it was a long relationship. That was a very difficult thing.

Add to that a civil lawsuit [original Oct. 2012, first amended Jan. 2013, second amended May 2013]. God can be glorified in a 50-million-dollar lawsuit. We received a civil lawsuit for 50 million for, it was alleged that we mishandled and covered up sexual abuse and protected pedophiles [true, like Nathaniel Morales]. It was mostly false allegations [totally untrue]. But what made it more challenging, if that wasn't enough, soon after that, there was a criminal lawsuit [no, there was a criminal case not lawsuit] that was made against a former member of our church [Nathaniel Morales] who 25 years ago had actually sexually abused a number of young boys [from 1983-1991]. And that was 25 years ago and that sadly happened with some of children of our friends, some of our friends. It was challenging. It is always sad when that comes to light.

But there was this conflation of those two things at the same time. So, the civil lawsuit was amended to add in this criminal case [no, that is totally inaccurate]. And it just made it more confusing. And it dragged on and we were dubbed the greatest evangelical scandal of sexual abuse in America [true, when taking into account that what was happening in CLC was happening at large in many SGM churches under C.J. Mahaney]. So that had taken a toll. So we were a robust church of about 4,300. We are about a third [1,500] to much less than half of what we formerly were. We have a large property. We had a lot of debt. To walk through that was a very, very challenging time.

And during that time, I want to turn this, I want to flip this very quickly to say, that to the uninformed Christian, to the uninformed individual, and to the immature Christian, that can appear to be, you can draw hasty conclusions about that and many people have [this is a condescending statement, if you are concerned for CLC you are an uninformed and immature Christian]. Sadly, and understandably a lot of people in our own church felt like what is going on here. We must be under judgement [true, for concealing child abuse, not disciplining C.J. Mahaney, acting corrupting in various ways like the scandalous Liebler investigation, etc.]. And I think certainly in part God was

disciplining us. There were things that were in our DNA, that had to be taken out and only God can do that, and only a trial like this can expose those things, bring those to the light, so that we can deal with that [the elders have never dealt with their sins including the cover up of P.J. Smyth's extraordinary lying when he denied all knowledge of his father's heinous crimes] and through it all, it has been about 4 or 5 years now, through it all I can say God has really been glorified. So many good things have happened [this is a gross exaggeration – membership continued to decline after 2012, Joshua Harris resigned as lead pastor in April 2015, Kenneth Maresco left as executive pastor in September 2015, other pastors left the church, etc.]. You would not know that by reading the press and by the way what has really been difficult, the national secular press, you would expect them to go after a church, they are looking for opportunities, and one magazine in particular [*Washingtonian* magazine], the author [Tiffany Stanley] received a grant from an organization that encouraged hit pieces against abusive authority especially in the church [I don't know if this claim is true]. Some would we were at least very unlucky [this was one part of God's discipline in exposing the 30-year old conspiracy to cover up the sexual abuse of children and sexual assault of young men by perpetrators in the church starting with Charles Schmitt in 1980].

<https://www.washingtonian.com/2016/02/14/the-sex-abuse-scandal-that-devastated-a-suburban-megachurch-sovereign-grace-ministries/>

But what is more disappointing is when the Christian press begins to believe it all [there was good reason to believe the allegations in the 46-page lawsuit]. And many, I could name some names of magazines and organizations, they never even called us, to find out, to get our side of the story [WORLD magazine & *Christianity Today* were reporting facts, not giving opinions.]. And very discouraging. So I think there is a lot to be learned here. I think God is up to a lot of good. And he is certainly up to a lot of good. And certainly bringing these two into our lives is just the latest great thing [pure hype] that God has begun to do in our church.

Rigby Wallace

So Ash. You are not an addendum to P.J.'s ministry. You are one flesh team. And as this door began to open you've had to wrestle with the implications as a wife, as a mum, as someone who is deeply connected to a community of very meaningful relationships in Johannesburg. We have walked with you on this. I think it will be so powerful for us just to hear what it has been like for you? How do you steward this particular season of transition?

Ashleigh Smyth

I don't like change. I don't like risks. You know, he [P.J.] says let's go and I panic. He and God say let's go. I read something so helpful that we don't fear change so much as we fear loss. And that has helped me to sort of separate. I do feel God is in this. I am sad about the loss. But actually, the change is exciting. I know God always takes us

forward. I am excited about what God has for us there. I am just dealing with the loss of leaving [GodFirst church in Johannesburg]. ... And it helped us as a family when we sat down and [were] dealing with our emotions a bit, let's separate, do we think this is what God has called us to and how do we feel. And all five of said yes we think this is God. And then we dealt with how we feel. And probably Sam and I are at the bottom of emotional scale. The others range upward. 20:47

Rigby Wallace

So let's just chat around the issue of affection, the growing affections. Nancy you are watching this process unfold, yes there is all the big picture, visional dimensions of this, but you are also watching a church having to open its heart to a new leader again and what's it like on the inside. Maybe you could just speak to how's the church kind of receiving Ashleigh and P.J.? You know, I would imagine, there's ups and downs on that because of what they have gone through, but we would love just to hear, it would help us to pray.

Nancy Lotinsky

Well, I felt like the Lord gave me a picture this morning of what the last five years [2011-2016] have been like. It was like being on a ship. And it was sailing nicely and everything was going smoothly, and then all of a sudden, it was becalmed, is that the word, where the wind stops, and you are just kind of sitting there, and then there were leaks coming in, and then all of a sudden there is a shot over the bow, and you just started getting this sensation, this ship is going down. It is sinking and people are going overboard. And that was just the kind of feeling that we were getting. And yet at the same time, we had this very strong sense, that God was up to his ultimate plan in this whole situation.

So over these last five years, we have seen the makeup of our church change radically. It is now very multicultural. We have over 60 countries represented in our church now. And the burden that P.J. has for mission, just fits so perfectly with where the church is at right now. Seeing some of our friends leave. Seeing our children's friends leave, all those things were very difficult; but at the same time, there was just such a strong sense that God was behind this whole thing and then to find out there was a connection with Terry that was between P.J. and Terry, that was monumental for a lot of us who had been there for a long time. We have been in the church for 30 years. Moved there when we were 31. So that gives you a picture of what our last 30 years have been like. Our children grew up in the church. They are all still there. The only one who is not is our daughter who was in a church that was planted by Covenant Life.

So we have seen from the outset, I mean P.J. came to speak and the very first time he spoke there, people said can he be our new senior pastor, I mean right from the very beginning they were just so drawn to him. And Ashleigh, the women just love her. There is no pretense about Ashleigh. She is just so comfortable and people relate to her so easily.

And the women, especially the elders' wives, have really fallen in love with her. It been really a blessing to see that happen.

And P.J. I don't know if you remember this, but the first time you were there, some of us went out to dinner, you asked Mark Mitchell, what are you going to do about the youth, or the young people, because that has been the biggest exodus. And we have a 20-year-old son. He is almost 21 and his peers are gone, they are just not there anymore [largely due to C.J.'s hypocrisy in leaving CLC]. I leaned over and I went, P.J., he's got to be the answer to this. We just had that sense from the beginning that even though at that point we didn't know you were coming, we thought, somehow this fits into the whole picture that God has for our church. So everyone loves them already.

Rigby Wallace

So P.J. one of things as your mates on the inside, we watched, would you speak and report back on any of your trips with Covenant Life. Without a deep growing sense of affection for the church. What has God been doing in your heart in relation to a [eldership] team with a whole bunch of new brothers, want the best for them, and yet need to love a church that has gone through so much. Talk to us.

P.J. Smyth

Yea. I think firstly we, I think Covenant Life Church is in way better shape than they realize they are. I think the eldership team is, I think the church is. They are doing way better than they should be doing after what they have gone through. So when we first connected with the church, we were unaware of the layers of pain, and so on, and we immediately saw the sound foundations of the church. There are a few that are cracked and wobbly. Maybe one or two that needs replacing. But some just need filling in. But most of the foundations is [are] exceptional. That the quality of spirituality and the things that we really prize, so they are the most worshipping, one of the most worshipping churches I have ever come across. And I have been in ten Sunday meetings now, and even Sundays meeting where the upfront leadership hasn't been as good, you know some weeks are not as good as others, even those weeks people are engaged and worshipping. A very grateful church, a very hospitable warm church, generous of heart. Love the word of God. Love the Holy Spirit. There is just so many things to fall in love with. So that was easy. Fall in love. And admire and think, man we have things to learn, this is terrific.

And then as we got to know people. There are so many people who are so likable and even those who are dealing with pain, are largely dealing with it in a godly way. They have been very warm and open to us. We have had the nine month interview process [Apr.-Dec. 2015] was so open and honest and frank. I just can't think of anything we didn't talk about. [This is a blatant lie. P.J. never talked about his knowledge of his father's crimes (e.g. sexual sadism) and his assistance in trying to help his father escape deportation and prosecution by the Zimbabwe government.] I know there will be bumps and things that we realize we should have talked about but just having that kind of an

environment which I know we cherish. You know, honesty and openness. Love and truth. [P.J. would never have been hired if he was truthful about his knowledge of his father crimes that included the violent beating of boys which P.J. sometimes observed.] And that has been very easy.

And then I think as we have got to know the – I've fallen in love with the area. [I lived in the Washington D.C. area for 10 years. People often move there because they are drawn to the wealth, power and prestige of living in the area.] This county [Montgomery County, MD] it is about the 12th most wealthy county out of 3,000 plus counties. It is the most linguistically diverse as well and that is an amazing combination to have. To be in the greater D.C. area gets my juices going. It would just be a privileged to serve that community [P.J. told CLC he aspires to reach the entire D.C. area]. And then our hearts have been steadily broken for the church but not in a condescending way. You know, "Oh these dear people, they need us." Not at all. They've got Jesus. They're coming up and out and we are so grateful to be joining their story which will become our story. And we know that God sent us. They have invited us, but God sent us. So we will go with courage and humility that both come from that sense of calling. But we feel really privileged. We see huge potential. Really this church for each other, and the local community area, and to be planting churches, and I keep, now because they are part of us [unofficially a part of Advance], I just keep finding myself thinking, you know when I was in Dar es Salaam recently, I keep thinking of people in Covenant Life who would be such a blessing to the guys in Dar for a short-term trip or something. All these people here [in CLC] if only they can meet Sheshi [Kaniki] and Shreti. They will just love each other. So we will do that gradually as the years ahead, make introductions, but I am so excited about the synergy there as well [as I said above, P.J. had Advance in mind in deciding to come to CLC].

Rigby Wallace

So there is this big open canvas called the future. Any last thoughts before we go to a little moment of prayer and prophecy. I just want to say up front, so we can ask you to prepare your hearts. We've been listening to the story. We want to keep them in our prayers. So any last thoughts around how we can stand with you. How we can stand with you as a community and maybe even outside of that, maybe there was something you wanted to say, that could help us, because this isn't the first or last transition in the history of the church. We really need to be listening and learning from the story. So maybe a last word from each of you. And then we will go to a moment of prayer and prophesy.

Nancy Lotinsky

Probably about 15 years ago, there was an article in our local newspaper. It was talking about the growing diversity in our area. It said, "It is as if there is a sign pointing at Gaithersburg and saying, "Move here" and so that was just one more thing that gave us this feeling there is a reason why God planted Covenant Life in that county, and then an

article that came out very recently saying we are one of the most diverse counties in the country. So there is a reason that we are planted right there.

Bo Lotinsky

Yea, I am confident that the future is going to be just wonderful. Honestly, I don't think much about the future. I just think about today and what we have to deal with today. It has been that way for a while. However, I have such a peace and an assurance that God is in this. And that God will do great things. And I am just not worried about trying to interpret what happened [in the past]. All I need to know is God is involved. He is a loving God. He has a purpose. He has a plan. It is divine. It's complicated. All we need to do is trust him. We just need prayer to continue to trust him completely, 100%, but I do believe prophetically, I do believe that God, all this happened. I'm sure this is somebody I recently talked to. Someone who wanted to do a documentary on this situation. I met with him recently out of state. As I explained everything as best I could, and as briefly as I could, he said this is so, I've never come across so complicated, it is impossible to do a documentary on this. And I agree. It is one of those things, and I think it is part of God's plan, and I really believe that when you go through something like this [i.e., *The Documents* being posted, C.J. Mahaney leaving CLC, SGM relocating to Louisville, the sex abuse lawsuit with 11 plaintiffs, the conviction of sex abuser Nathaniel Morales who oversaw the CLC international student ministry at the University of MD, 65% of the members leaving CLC, all the youth exiting the church, etc.], something great is going to happen on the other end. And I am very, very excited and can't wait until the Smyths' get there, and we can together discover all the great things God has for us as a church. So pray for us as a church. I wish I could say everybody is in faith and have come through this and are fully healed. There are some things that have to be dealt with, but I think once the Smyths get there things will be great. So continue to pray for us please.

Ashleigh Smyth

One obviously thing is that we will be granted the visa and they'll say yes. And then be praying for our family. We are splitting up and leaving a kid behind and starting new stuff, that would be great. And just for a good transition. I supposed it is a bit like the first year of marriage. We have just come out of a transition in our home church handing over and going into to a new one taking over. Sensitivity, it was good this morning, kindness and courage. You know the merging of us and a new church. Just that the transition is smooth and sweet for everybody.

P.J. Smyth

For me, if I think of ten areas that need healing in the church. Or ten problems areas, for example, hypothetically ten. I think we need to pray that just as the tide of hope and faith and growth and saved [are] added. You know we are charging a mountain again together. I hope that rising tide, we just drowned seven out of ten of the problems. They will just evaporate. They will disappear. And then we are left with three that the Lord

will – is manageable, ten is not manageable. As Bo said it is too complex. We need a lot more leadership and wisdom and nuance. We just need the kindness of God to come and to raise and we will work with him and be wise as he enables us, but we need the Lord.

Rigby Wallace

So we do want to prayer for you. And we want to have a focused time of prayer. I'd ask you to just stand together. And we want to try and do this in a way that is a little bit of chaotic order. So as we have been listening to the story there are probably some stirrings in your own heart. Possible whispers of the Spirit that you would want to come and be part of praying for them. I know we have all prayer for you but we can't you all up front. I am going to ask you to come a join me and then I am just going launch out in something I am feeling in God. Maybe we can just piggy back on each other. See God just bring grace, bring a sense of strength to this process. When it comes to prophetic contribution, this isn't a hand break as it is just wanting to give some general leadership where we are going with this. It is about Covenant Life and the Smyths. It is not about Advance [Pat Ennis, Chair of the Search Team, told me five months before this interview that it was also about Advance]. We want to see that church come into a place of healing and we want the redemptive potential of that community to be stirred up again and for us it is what we want for them and not from them. Let us just come before the Lord in prayer as we wait on him.