



SHAPERS OF THE CHURCH  
IN THE 20TH CENTURY

# The Quiet Leader

DENNIS BENNETT

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**T**he Rev. Dennis Bennett never asked to be the leader of a movement. He seemed content to be a faithful and successful parish priest at St. Mark's, a thriving church in Van Nuys, CA before he came face to face with the Holy Spirit. But when God turned Fr. Bennett's life upside-down, he embraced the change as a challenge and willingly followed the Lord's leading where it took him.

Renewal seems almost a commonplace, household word to us in 1999, but 40 years ago few things were more foreign. In 1959, God began leading Fr. Bennett on a journey that would shake the foundations of the church and make national headlines along the way. As he became more intrigued by the work of the Holy Spirit, Fr. Bennett knew he had to make his beliefs public, even in the face of intense opposition.

The parochial conflict - both internal and external - reached a boiling point on Sunday, April 3, 1960. Speaking from the pulpit, he announced to his congregation that he had had an encounter with the Holy Spirit, and that he spoke in tongues. The immediate reaction was disturbing. At the end of the second service that day, one of his assistant priests removed his vestments, threw them on the altar and walked out of the church.

The repercussions continued in the months that ensued. In July 1960 *Newsweek* published an article entitled, "Rector and a Rumpus." *Time* ran its version of the story in August in a piece called, "Speaking in Tongues." Seeing the media circus which threatened to shatter his Van Nuys congregation, he relocated to Seattle, where he started over as rector of St. Luke's.

Of course, that was all just the beginning for Fr. Bennett, who has long been regarded as the patriarch of renewal, not just in the Episcopal Church, but throughout all mainline churches. Many people think the best leaders are the dynamic ones, those "charismatic" people who can whip a crowd into a frenzy. Fr. Bennett was quite the opposite. He was a gentle soul who had a passion for the Lord, but whose personality appeared quite "non-charismatic."

He wasn't regarded as an outstanding speaker, at least not in the traditional sense, but his lifestyle spoke volumes. He invested himself in the lives of people around him realizing that true renewal has to be caught, not taught. Most people who met Fr. Bennett personally walked away from the meeting feeling better about themselves and empowered in their walk with Christ.

He affected the lives of thousands of people whom he never met,

but were impacted by his books. His first, *Nine O'clock in the Morning*, is a classic retelling of his early experiences with the Holy Spirit. *The Holy Spirit and You*, which he wrote with his wife, Rita, is a primer in the understanding of the Holy Spirit and his operation among Christians.

More than anything, he had an air of credibility. In this society, which has taken less and less stock in the truth, Dennis Bennett was a man of great honesty and integrity. The ACTS 29 ministry, formerly Episcopal Renewal Ministries, was founded in 1973, due in large part to his direct involvement. When the invitation was sent to priests across the country to rally in Dallas for a conference about the Holy Spirit, hundreds responded eagerly. Today, this ministry stands as a monument to what the Lord can do through the life of a man who is willing to respond to his leading.

Fr. Bennett died in 1991. He never set out to change the church nor to make a name for himself. But through his servanthood and his willing spirit, he gave us a reinforcement of the enduring truth that God in Christ Jesus through his Holy Spirit is in charge of the church, and that the basic tenets of the faith will be upheld.

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