

WORDS FROM THE WILDERNESS

Establishing a Prayer Team To Share God's Heart to Reach the Lost

It has always been about Ocean Springs...And More!

I am amazed and humbled at the blessed beginning God has brought to this new ministry of evangelism and missions in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Yes, it is early. Yes, we are in the first baby steps of what I pray will be a long-time, long-term, embedded ministry in this city. But, as I have said to a lot of people directly: In over twenty years of pastoral ministry, I have never seen God move ahead of us, open doors, or "fill the sails" of ministry like we are witnessing daily in Ocean Springs. There is a strong core group starting out - Connected around the gospel and already close to each other in relationships and the call to grow up in Christ and in grace. And the way God is bringing connections and conversations in our evangelism efforts around the Government Street District, as well as all over town - the entire parish of Ocean Springs...well, it is the kind of thing that makes it clear: **Only God could be doing this!**

But, even as Stephanie and I marvel, celebrate, and simply bow our heads to thank God for the beginning He is bringing here... **The prayer, the hope, and the dream of this ministry has always been about more than Ocean Springs.** There are more than 400,000 people living on the gulf coast between the Mississippi state line with Louisiana and the line with Alabama and Mobile. Even more, there is an openness, an opportunity, a "fertile ground" here for evangelism **like I have never before seen in person.** So, even from the very beginning, we have been praying for other people to see the potential, feel the need - and join our team. We are praying for the Lord to bring interns here, and residents, and volunteers. People who can see what the Lord is doing to reach the lost and the broken and to build His church here. People who will want to learn, be trained, and be part of God fulfilling the Great Commission. People who will then, in turn, **plant more churches on the coast**, or go back to their own existing churches and spread a **vision and a zeal for evangelism** back to other churches, so that a flame for reaching the lost spreads far and wide to many places and many people that need the gospel. In short: We are praying for God to send people **to be part of a movement that He is creating!**

So, let me introduce you to Steve

Steve Lanier and his wife Sherry are like institutions and forces of nature within the PCA. They have been in ministry together through three, or actually four combined careers, over the past forty-nine years. First, they served for over twenty-five years with Youth For Christ (*Fun Fact: Steve was Stephanie's Youth For Christ director back when she was in high school in Jackson, MS!*). After Youth For Christ, Steve served for seven years directing Outreach and Missions at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Jackson (*Fun Fact #2: Trinity was the first church that Stephanie and I joined after getting married, as our paths continued to cross with Steve and Sherry*). Next, God called Steve to help plant



Redeemer Church, PCA, a multiethnic PCA church in Jackson, where for seventeen years, he and Sherry witnessed God's provision and work in and through a wonderful body of Christ. And, while they were both at Redeemer, God called Sherry to join the staff full time at the PCA's "Mission to North America Disaster Response" (*Sherry organizes the response of ministry resources after hurricanes, tornadoes, etc.*). Steve officially retired earlier this year....but anybody who knows Steve and Sherry and their personalities knows that they are not going to stay on the sidelines for long. Which leads me to another Divine intersection, this time in Ocean Springs!

Hear Steve talk about that in his own words

After seventeen years, I formally and honorably retired from the staff of Redeemer Church, PCA. However, I had been asking God if He would allow us the opportunity for yet another career in His service - Member care for missionaries and church planters. Well, He has once again been so gracious and has granted us the opportunity for another venue of service. We have partnered with Deeper Still Missions, located in Memphis, to serve missionaries and church planters. We are serving a team in Bangkok, Thailand and part of our call is to Ocean Springs, to help in any way we can with Hope Presbyterian Church.

Ocean Springs is an amazing place, with a population of around 20,000 people. It is a growing community and a center for the arts. The downtown area is full of all kinds of entertainment centers, local eateries and bars and great shops, beaches, music venues, and so much more. Yes, there are some very fine churches reaching certain segments of the community. And yet, there is a great need for more Christian communities of Jesus followers there.

The towns that make up the Mississippi Gulf Coast (Gulfport, Biloxi, Ocean Springs, Gautier, D'Iberville, St. Martin, and Pascagoula) each have their own history and unique narratives, but they also share much in common — And **one thing they have in common is the need for the gospel.** While so much of Mississippi still shares a respect for the church and historical Christianity, the gulf coast does not. Many people find their way to the coast to leave their pasts behind to seek refuge from life on the shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico; they are running as far as they can. If the land mass were farther south, those coming to the coast would move farther south. The gulf seems to be the barrier that stops their journey for peace, healing, and meaning and a new life — Things they are seeking and searching for, often everywhere but from The One who alone can heal them and satisfy their needs.

Mark and Stephanie's hearts are for the lost. One of the draws for Sherry and for me to come alongside Mark and Stephanie does not just include years of random meetings through different ministry opportunities together, but has been their evangelistic fervor. Our hearts beat in rhythm with theirs for the lost. Mark is a gifted pastor and evangelist. He is at home with those who love and worship Jesus as Lord. At the same time, he is at home with those who sneer at the name of Christ. God's love for His creation is so clearly seen and experienced by everyone who spends any time with Mark and Stephanie. I have been with Mark as we visited folks in local eateries, bars, live music venues, and shops, and in every one of those very different environments, Mark knows so many people by name and is greeted as a friend by so many.



A quick story

One evening, Mark asked me to “*go fishing*” with him on a Thursday evening. No, we didn’t get on a fishing vessel and head off into the Gulf. Instead, we headed down to a local restaurant on Government Street to meet and to develop relationships with the locals. **WE WERE FISHING FOR MEN!** When we returned home that night to meet our wives, Sherry was so excited to see the look on my face. I was energized to have met and to have had meaningful conversations with so many people who, at this point in their lives, have chosen to distance themselves from anything and anybody who resembles or has a love for Jesus Christ. Yet, we were able to make meaningful inroads into their lives. We have a long way to go in sharing the love of God in Christ with many of them, but God is faithful, and we can already see some walls coming down.



We also have a small core group that meets on Sunday evenings in Mark and Stephanie’s home. It is a diverse group generationally, educationally, and vocationally, but we have come together to join Jesus in the field of souls and to see Him create among us a vibrant church community who loves and worships Jesus as Lord, who will serve and care for one another, and who will love those who have not yet heard of Christ nor ever desired to surrender their lives to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Sherry and I are excited, too, to see our daughter, son-in-law and two grandsons serving as active members of this core group. Serving together as a family is icing on the cake for us!

And the core group itself is already engaging in ministry: A couple of weeks ago, there was a shooting at a bar in Ocean Springs; and a young man was killed and others wounded. One of our core group members works with a parent of a young girl who was severely injured while she simply passed by the location of the shooting and a stray bullet tore through her leg. That young lady’s mother called our core group member, who asked if she could pray for that lady and her family. The mother responded with, “That is why I called you; I knew you would pray for us.” Since then the young lady has improved, even though she has a long road to recovery with a number of surgeries to go before she will be able to walk again. And just this last week, Sherry and I were able to meet with that mother and to pray with her as she headed to the hospital to bring her daughter home. Also, at that same location, a sibling of the young man who died that night is also under the loving care of that same core group member. **That is how God uses us in the sphere of influence in which he has called us!**

I am excited to see **God develop a worshipping community in our parish of Ocean Springs that will eventually plant more churches along the gulf coast.** I am excited to see how God is using our folks to minister in their own unique spheres of influence. Please pray for Hope Presbyterian Church and for Mark and Stephanie and for Sherry and for me as we serve together in Ocean Springs and on the Mississippi Gulf Coast!

We are excited to see God growing this team - And the reach of this ministry

- Will you pray that our **new core group** continues to bond with each other around the gospel, to bring more people into its midst, and to find ways to build relationships for evangelism in their own, individual spheres of influence.
- Will you pray for our efforts at building relationships, listening, and trust toward being able to **share the gospel with the lost** in Ocean Springs - In the Government St. District...and everywhere we meet them. Pray for repeated connections and deepening interactions, over a long period of time, so that lost people will trust us to enter into their lives with the hope that comes through the gospel!
- And will you pray for the **unfolding and growing vision to share this ministry**, in the months and years to come, with new church plants on the coast and back to existing churches who can catch a new vision and zeal for participating and engaging in their own relationships with the lost! Pray for Steve Lanier's new role with this ministry - a role and work of development, force multiplication, connections, and church partnerships. Pray for us as we plan and prepare to train many more in evangelism.

God is on the move on the coast - Will You Join In?

We believe that God is building something special here in Ocean Springs. There is an opportunity for ministry and evangelism here like we have never seen - And we believe God is going to do amazing things to reach the lost here, to build His church, and to bless other churches. But new ministries, new residencies, new internships, and new partnerships bring a need for new resources.

Would you consider making a financial investment in this unfolding story? Whether it is a first time gift or as an ongoing supporter - Your gift will make a difference! Here is how you can give:

- Use the QR code to the right, or visit <http://give.pcamna.org/to/1749>
- Checks can also be sent payable to "Mission to North America"
PO Box 890233
Charlotte, NC, 28289-02333
(Write "Mark Horn, Ocean Springs Church Plant" on the memo line)
- And finally, more information for all of this and updates on our Ocean Springs story can be found at our website: www.PlantHopeOS.org!



Thank you, Friends. Thank you for being part of what God is doing to bring His story and His glory to the coast. God's love, grace, and peace be with each of you!



A closing encouragement:

"Christianity is for people who have the particular kind of strength to admit that their flaws are not superficial, that their heart is deeply disordered, and that they are incapable of rectifying themselves. It is for those who can see that they need a savior, Jesus Christ dying on the cross, to put them right with God."

- Tim Keller

