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Martina's choice—and the church that helped her make it

Watching three-year-old Marisa build the walls of her playhouse, you would not think her life was a miracle. Her black hair bounces lightly when she gathers another two or three large plastic blocks, and then she laughs as she puts the blocks in place. This is not the story of a child who survived a risky medical procedure but, rather, the story of a child who survived the process of her mother's choice. An immigrant working to support her family back home, Martina* found herself unwed and with an unwanted pregnancy, as have so many young women of varied backgrounds.

And the story of three-year-old Marisa would have ended very differently were it not for a caring Christian church.

The church

Located in an urban fringe neighborhood, the First Baptist Church of Orlando, Florida exists as a thriving megachurch with powerful Christ-centered preaching. But they do not just preach Jesus; they seek to live out His life. The many ways they serve include ministering to those with unplanned pregnancies. Although a difficult and controversial topic, this congregation chooses to listen to

women, provide Christian conversation in the process of their choice, and demonstrate Christ's love rather than dwelling on the controversy itself.

At this working church, volunteers serve the homeless, minister to the poor, help students in inner city schools, empower people by assisting them in obtaining government-issued IDs, help with Meals on Wheels, provide jail ministry, provide a counseling center, serve at the pregnancy center, or involve themselves in other local and international ministries.

The pregnancy center

On the edge of the church campus sits an attractive, well-lit, modern, neatly landscaped office building—obviously a safe place. The roadside sign clearly announces two tenants: “Counseling Center” and “Pregnancy Center.” Both are identified as ministries of the Orlando First Baptist Church.

No question, First Baptist is a very conservative congregation with strong and clear convictions about abortion. Like so many churches, they promote a pro-life message. But they model their beliefs in a winsome and nonjudgmental way, one that saves lives.

When you enter the glass doors of the pregnancy center, a clean and well-furnished waiting area and two

receptionists welcome you. Behind those receptionists are four or five staff members busily preparing for the steady stream of clients. The artwork has been carefully chosen to celebrate life, relationships, and children. A rack of literature invites browsing; one booklet is titled *Healthy Pregnancy*, and other leaflets that further reveal the mission of the center include titles like *Ten Questions Expectant Mothers Ask About Adoption*, and *What's Best for Your Baby?* and information on House of Hope, community assistance programs, Sexual Assault Treatment Center, and Birthing Cottage of Winter Park.

People in the waiting area are mostly women. Some are far along in pregnancy, others not. Some appear nervous, others more at ease, especially those who came for a parenting class or to pick up baby supplies. Some arrive as a couple. Carmen, fluent in English and Spanish, serves as the director of the pregnancy center, surrounded by a staff of seven full-time salaried professionals, plus nearly 100 volunteers, mostly from the church. The volunteers affirm their commitment to life rather than to abortion, and they affirm their faith in Jesus. They are trained to work with clients in graceful, accepting, and nonjudgmental ways.

Carmen describes the mission of the center with these words: “To bring people to relationship with Jesus Christ.” The center remains owned, operated, and funded by the church. Carmen states that in 2014 they handled nearly 11,000 client visits, with about 8,500 of those being return visits for follow-up. The large volume of client visits is due to those who access the personal counseling, birth classes, and parenting classes and who obtain baby supplies once a week or more for years. They give free pregnancy tests, along with sonograms to determine the child’s approximate month in gestation. People hear about the center through public service announcements, service organizations, the county health department, and word of mouth. The center intentionally nurtures its relationship with the county health department and is well respected for the quality of counseling and service the organization provides. Clients may

be linked with adoption agencies that hold to high values and provide a high quality of service.

At the same time—and this is so important—if expectant mothers, after counseling, insist on abortion, the center endeavors to guide them to medical facilities that will provide further consultation and care in a responsible way. Counseling them in ways that represent the love and grace of Jesus, the staff hopes to help mothers make a choice for life. Most clients do, and the center provides three years of ongoing counseling and services to support the mothers who decide to give birth and raise their babies. They provide support and counseling, as well, for those who do not choose life.

Martina’s choice

Martina, like many others, felt a great deal of shame about her pregnancy. She feared that her mother, a devout Catholic, would be extremely

upset. When she suspected that she was pregnant, she called the county health department, hoping to get services from a physician. Desperate, she was considering abortion as her primary option. The health department will not provide services without a woman first proving her pregnancy, and for that she was guided to the pregnancy center.

When Martina arrived at the center, she asked whether the testing was actually free and was told it was but that the testing would cost up to an hour and a half of her time. That time is the only thing she was asked to give. An initial intake counselor asked a few questions, nothing too personal. Martina was pleased that the conversation was brief and felt respected. In a few minutes, she was led to a private room and began talking with a professional counselor who is committed to Jesus and to helping women in Martina’s position. Martina mentioned her interest in abortion, and the counselor assured her



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they would provide support to help her get through the decision process.

But first, the pregnancy test. At the center, when a woman tests positive, she is also given a sonogram. That helps the counselors communicate intelligently with those expectant mothers considering abortion. Martina was pregnant, and she had delayed coming to the center for some time; thus, the sonogram test, which Martina welcomed, helped her realize just how much development had taken place.

made the decision for life. Today she is so glad that she did, for she is a proud mother who loves her child, celebrates a newfound relationship with Christ, and is raising little Marisa in the church.

The ministry

Women served by the pregnancy center can select from three options: motherhood, adoption, or abortion. The center exerts every effort to ensure abortion does not happen. As might be expected, many who enter their

love, not shame. The center will provide, with reluctance, a referral to a medical facility if a woman persists in that decision, holding on to hope they may still choose life. They prefer in such cases to know the women will be safe. The center considers it a loss and grieves over those who cling to that choice.

But the center most dramatically helps women who choose to continue to be mothers. They provide a myriad of services, leading the mother to a joyful parenting experience, one finding

Counseling them in ways that represent the love and grace of Jesus, the staff hopes to help mothers make a choice for life.

Some women come determined to abort, and no amount of counseling and prayer will reverse their position. Martina was not one of those, and she was moved when she understood how much happens early in the gestation of an unborn child.

Though feeling shame, she was now unsure what to do. The assurance of the support of the center, administered in the counseling provided that first day, gave her pause. She did not ask for a referral to a physician as she had thought she would; instead, she made a second appointment to meet with the counselor again.

This was not an easy decision. In the first few weeks after the initial visit, she wavered, seriously considering the abortion option. But she always found support from her counselor.

In short, Marisa exists because of the ministry of the pregnancy center. Or more accurately, because Christians love like Jesus loved. Apart from that support, Martina is unlikely to have

doors are fearful, resentful, and full of shame. Before the center administers pregnancy testing, they provide a counseling session to every client, ask about their spiritual life, and pray with them. When the results are communicated, they again pray with them. If the woman is pregnant, they pray God's blessing on the pregnancy. If a woman persists in interest in abortion, she is counseled regarding the current development of the child and regarding the physical, emotional, and spiritual implications of abortion. One of the staff members shares her work with women who are post-abortion and gives them her book, *Journey of Healing: Finding Healing and Hope After Abortion*, asking them to carefully reconsider before proceeding.

The center does not treat women who have aborted as outcasts. Many of their clients are women who are struggling emotionally and spiritually after abortion and become involved in recovery groups. They treat them with

fulfillment in connection with Christ. The mother receives free baby supplies for three years. She also receives counseling before and after birth, and for three years following, if she would like. They have birthing classes, monitoring of proper physician care, and parenting classes. The center organizes Bible classes and relational counseling, and encourages church attendance. All free.

Choices to abort, offer for adoption, or relate as a natural mother are not limited to women of any class or background. However, women who are disadvantaged by poverty are more vulnerable when processing such decisions. Their unborn children are at greater risk. Apart from a ministry such as offered by the pregnancy center, women in poverty generally cannot access the best counseling, support, or medical assistance.

Three considerations

Martina and Marisa are joyful servants of Christ today, as are hundreds

of others, because of this ministry. Why is the center so powerful in discipling people for Christ? They serve people with a primary purpose to minister, not to evangelize. The staff and volunteers recognize the realities of culture, respond with respect rather than disdain, and consistently live in a countercultural way. They engage the culture with reason and inspire with the love of Christ. They sacrifice in remarkable ways.

Their work is not marked by words of disapproval or political posturing. Their service is incarnational and missional love demonstrated in caring relationships. They do offer Bible study groups. They do invite clients to church. But the testimony of those blessed by the ministry of the center is that they were drawn to Christ by the compassion they experienced before they became interested in biblical teaching.

Readers may wonder how their local congregation can succeed in such a large-scale mission. When considering what might seem too big a challenge, there are three areas for reflection. The first suggests vision. Nothing great in the service of Christ happens without someone first grasping a vision. The second—the power of God. He is able to do great things when we claim His power, moving forward with prayerfully formed judgment one step at a time. The pregnancy center began to serve in a more limited way and experienced blessing as they moved forward. The third reflection would be to consider the many Christians who will sacrifice both financially and in service in unusual ways for such a ministry.

Our faith in the abundant blessing of God is often too small. People and corporations can respond generously when vision and action are present.

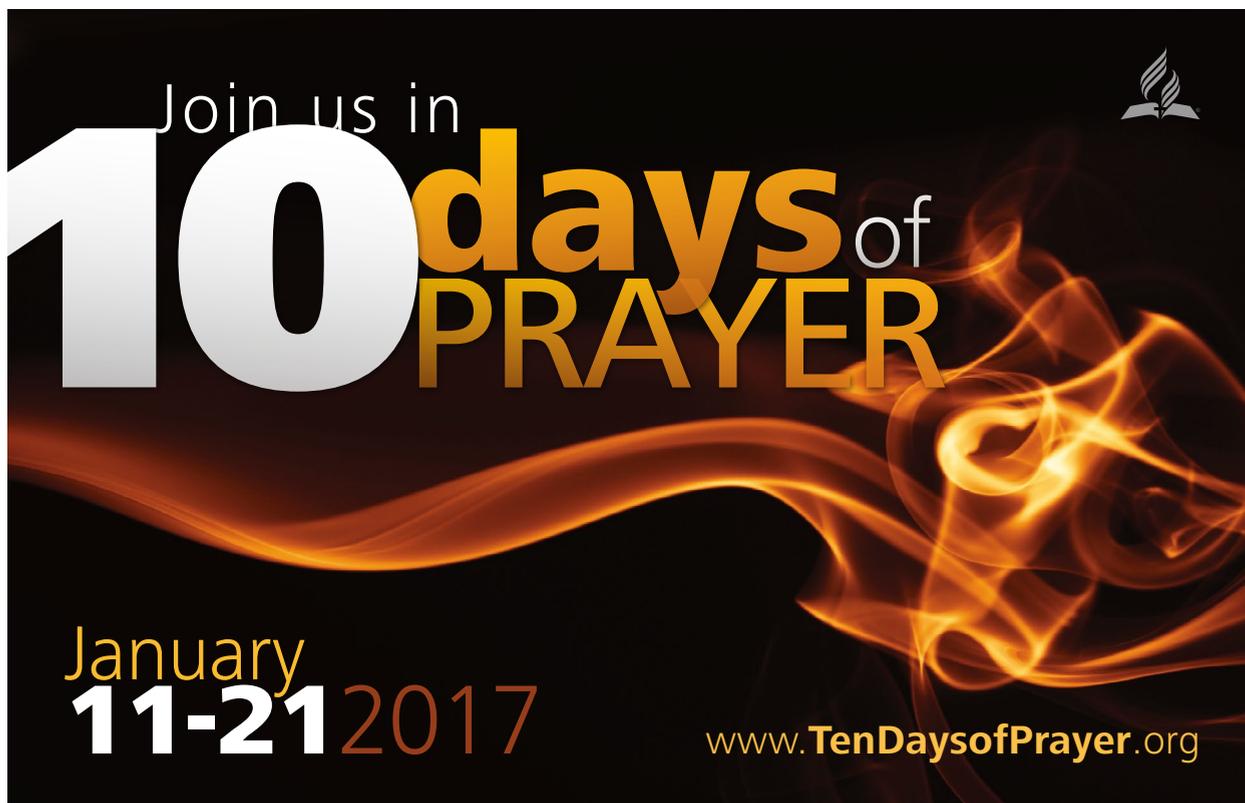
This may mean a nonprofit organization formed to receive contributions and will mean giving people the opportunity to support. People respond generously to big ideas.

Such ministries may be directly fostered by a church, or by an association of churches, or even by the initiative of one person or a small group in an area church.

Serving Jesus offers unexpected opportunities, perhaps like the unexpected pregnancies women like Martina experience. But in every such circumstance God may transform people and usher them into new life—both spiritually, as with Martina, and literally, as with little Marisa. 

* The story of Martina and Marisa is based on an actual client's experience, but details have been altered to protect their identity. While their identity has been guarded, the events and facts are very much within the scope of the experience of hundreds served every year by the pregnancy center.

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