

Interviewee: Reverend Laura Thompson

Interviewer: Lacy Offut

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Abstract: Laura Thompson is the first independent female pastor in the Shoals area. While she was working in insurance sales she felt the call to preach and set off on the journey that would end in the founding of Open Door Ministries. She founded the church in October of 1987 and the church went through three moves before settling on 1301 Pinehurst Blvd.

The choice to become a pastor was not one she had ever thought would be open for her since she was a woman. Many people in her life told her that she was wrong in wanting to preach. However, Thompson overcome what her detractors said and followed what she believed to be God's path for her life. She focused her ministry on helping other people, especially the youth in Sheffield, and founded many programs to do such.

When she first began she had no church and only five members. From that small group a movement started which has touched all of the Quad cities. The building Open Door is now in at Pinehurst Blvd. was formerly the Highland United Methodist Church, which had a history of community involvement that Thompson and her church members are proud to continue. Her work is focused mainly on outreach and includes such things as Operation Breadbasket, providing affordable childcare, outreach to youth detention centers, and visiting nursing homes. Open Door Church Ministries has a long history of community outreach and involvement. Since Thompson first begun her ministry she has worked closely with the community to help others and it has become the most successful ministry in the Quad cities area.

Thompson is a very spiritual woman whose faith in God is echoed in all she does. It is this faith in God that gave her the strength to become a pastor in the face of a life time of opposition and this faith which led her to help others. All of the work she does in the community is aimed at helping others whether it is financial, spiritual, or material. Open Door Ministries is a reflection of her own determination to reach out to her community and make a difference in other people's lives.

Lacy Offutt: Alright, there we go.

Rev. Laura Thompson: *indistinct* I'm trying to think of information that I, you know. *indistinct.* But um, I got called in 19-the later part of 1984/85, into the ministry and uh, when I got started I um had been in the Baptist's Association. You know but I was not a minister or a pastor or anything and then I accepted my calling to ministry and then after I accepted my calling in the ministry I didn't know what I was going to do. because there were no uh, independent female pastors in the area, mostly it was just male and um so I just really kinda just prayed and to you know seek the Lord aware. I mean I attended uh you know some of the Methodist churches and uh some of the um, uh EME churches and CME churches because you know they would accept women but it was through a long process and I just didn't feel like that's what god wanted me to do. So I really thought that what, what I was being led to do was start something um I would say unique and different. But, um, but not just to, you know, a lot of times when people start churches they be trying to get other people to come you know from other people's churches. I didn't want to do that I really want to, um, kinda talk to people who was not in church and to deal with young people.

So that's what I did- and uh so um and uh- when I started meeting I started meeting at 308 South Pittsburg Avenue, Sheffield. And, uh, so one of the things that helped me was I used to teach *indistinct* Bible study and that was for senior citizens, just in the area. We would go to the home and we'd teach the Sunday school lesson and they were from various churches but we would meet every Tuesday, you know, during the week and uh just share the Word. The Sunday school lesson and some of those elderly ladies, Sister Daisy Fry she's deceased now. They would come over to the church over on Pittsburg and so I started out just having services uh on Tuesdays and Thursdays and Sundays.

But I was there every day because I really was just trying to get a sense of direction of what I was suppose to do. And the most of people I would talk to uh about starting the church was not encouraging, you know not in this area because it was just the Bible belt and this something hadn't been really been done. So I sought God, how to you know, go back doing that, and get my bylaws and all those kinds of things together. So I start having church, um, over on Pittsburg, and I stayed, uh. I got licensed, I got ordained, uh, and, uh, February 1990, uh by pastor Larry Maddock from Chattanooga, Tennessee. And ,uh, so after then we started having services and, uh, on that night that I had, uh, five people to come- so all become a part of our church. You want their names?

Lacy Offutt: That's not necessary. Can you remember them?

Rev. Laura Thompson: Oh yeah, We had *something* Alan, um Margret Thompson, and Tonya Carter and Michael Jackson and um Daniel Mullens. That's five right? M'kay, they became part of our church. So we start setting up, getting things together, start doing a uh, start outreach to the children. So we would, uh, pick up the kids, during the summer time.

Rev. Laura Thompson: Talking on cell phone *I'm at the church you need to come*

Rev. Laura Thompson: And um we started out, doing an outreach to the children and we would pick them up during the summer. From 8-4, we would keep the kids, you know cause that's when we were really trying to get started. I had Lorrie Jackson to- Lorrie *indistinct* at the time- they would come and ya know they would help us teach the children. Like a Vacation Bible School during the summer for 'bout a couple months, just trying to help out the community. So from there we just, we started growing we had different *indistinct* come and be part of the ministry, and uh, for a number of years that's what we did.

We did outreach, and ya know on Sunday evenings we would play volleyball and ya know get the neighborhood to come in and just had different activities. And that's where I felt God was leading me to do things. So in 1992 we left Pittsburgh and went to 214 North Nashville Avenue, downtown Sheffield. And so when we got there, you know we started having different kinda programs, different outreach ministries. We started uh, feeding, uh we had Operation Breadbasket, what we called it, we were doing Thanksgiving, we were doing food for the community. You know and we, uh, started doing different things like that and um, we started a clean-up program in the city of Sheffield. At that time Mayor uh Ash, was the mayor him and his wife, was the mayor of the city of Sheffield. And we started a clean-up program every Saturday we would just, walk the streets of Sheffield, pick up trash, and you know then they would have people come who would pick it up. So we did that, we just did a number of outreaches. Try to you know engulf, so I had a lot of young folk, I didn't have that many elderly people. I had maybe one or two elderly; rest of it was just young people. But we would go to different parts of the city, like over there where they have the school now. We would play ball in the field, you know just to get the neighborhood to come out. We would serve hotdogs, you know stuff like that. It's just something to kinda get the community going.

So we stayed there until 2010 and then, uh, on January first of 2011 we moved here to this church. So we still do outreach, we have a lot of outreach stuff and um our church participates in a whole lot of different, other things. I don't know how specifically but, but I'm gonna give you that other part of the information on what else you may need to know

Lacy Offutt: How did you decide to get into the ministry, in the first place?

Rev. Laura Thompson: Well, I had been to church all my life. Well, I just didn't know from what I had been taught, was that you know, God didn't call women to preach. That's what I had been taught. Until, uh, you know I was reading for myself, and got an understanding that I knew God, that's what God was doing for me. Speaking to my heart, to you know, do different things.

And along that I had people, to discourage me, to tell me that um, you know, He don't do that and you know how wrong I was for doing that. But I've been doing it for over 25,27,28 years now. So um, that's I knew.

God was tugging at my heart but I didn't want to do what everybody else was doing. I wanted to do something different. I want people to know God differently. You know I don't want them to just, uh I know this is the traditional way to be inside of a building. But I wanted to be able to have a relationship with God that we could have, uh, you know we could talk, we could share. And then when we come together to study the word of God to make it really apple core of our lives that we could start, you know, living this thing. It's not just going to read the Bible, put it down, or you know, we do whatever we want to do. But it's the apple core part, and that the Holy Spirit is, still alive and that He lives inside of us. And in living inside of us, He helps us make decisions, you know, when we pray, and when we ask God for things that we're going through to help us to come out of those things. He gives direction, you know, how we should go and what we should do.

So that's how I know that God, uh, you know called me; and I was um, was part of this organization for Baptist church and I had been a matron. So that means I was over some younger women, 25 up you know to 45 somewhere like that. And I had always been in church, but because of what was taught I never pursued that. Until I knew the Lord spoke to my heart and say that you're not going to be doing this, you're going to start doing this. And so I asked Him, how I know how I'm gonna do that, I've never preached no sermon. I never did anything like that. And you know I- you know you've done a speech or uh, you had some words or remarks- something like that to say. But you never went through the process. While, while all this was happening to me- I didn't know it was happening.

But the pastor of Zion at that time was Reverend C. T Hamilton and he had on off-site campus of Selma University, which is a Christian school. So I just was there and I was taking the classes. You know I never knew that I was being prepared for this. But that's where I started, you know. I started reading, I started studying and um, after 17 years of doing this I went back to, I went back to school. I went over to Shoals after 17 years I had went to UNA and, but I didn't get to finish. So I went, you know, to try and get my courses and things uh caught, you know, try to catch up. Do a lot of little speed reading, and get all of my little fundamental basic things out of the way so I can you know, cause I really want to be prepared in order to share with the people. You know, I just didn't, you know, want to just say anything but I wanted them to have an understanding, have a depth of the Word and, uh, with that you have to have education. You know so that you can best explain to them, the Word of God. So I wanted to do that and um, I had an opportunity to, you know, do some outside studying and different things like that. I don't know-that's all, that's how I started.

Lacy Offutt: So have you lived in the Shoals area your whole life?

Rev. Laura Thompson: Yeah, I was born in Florence. And, um, in 1975 I got married- to Marvin Thompson and we stayed in a barn in Cherokee area. But I used to sell insurance in Sheffield. I used to be a progressive um protective industrial insurance company, used to be right down on the corner downtown in Sheffield. And I used to sell insurance for them. And uh, even when I was selling insurance, I would always carry my Bible, cause I had a debit, and you know, my debit -some was in Sheffield, most of it was in Tuscumbia, I had some in Town Creek, you know, different things like that.

So, but uh then around here, you know I traveled. We lived in Spring City, Tennessee and we lived in Waynesborough, North Carolina but, but I wasn't in ministry then. I was in ministry before, while I was doing all that moving- I was, my husband was traveling around with TVA, But then when we moved back home, this is what I started doing.

Lacy Offutt: M'kay so um, could you tell me about any of the ministries your church is doing right now, any of the programs you've started?

Rev. Laura Thompson: Um, we have a daycare- Kids Just Like Us Daycare, we after school program, we have um, we have um, we have where the kids can come and we have a computer lab- where the kids can, you know, go and get on the computer if they need to. One of the things we still do is the Operation Breadbasket and we still have different kind of little fundraisers we do in the community. Uh, we had, uh, we have a lot of different people to use our church. I think, you know, Brother Tom McKnight- you know him? He came and spoke at our church several times. You know we had him do a black history, black history month was in February, and he came to uh, share with us all different things.

We have, um, many kind of outreach programs, many kinds of things that we do. We would, uh, we used to go to the detention centers. You know, and just kind of share with the kids there. You know, we couldn't tell them our name or nothing like that. I mean, you know, we had first name basis, we couldn't ask them nothing about them but we just had the opportunity where we could go and just share the Word of God with them. And for years we went to the nursing home, we had a nursing home ministry. That you know- we would take things: tissue, you know lotion, stuff that they could use. S'cuse me. Sometimes during the holidays we still do that. And we still, um, prepare dinners for the detention centers and stuff like that for, use it for the Thanksgiving and Christmas, cause sometimes you know, they don't get a home cooked meal. So we would do that, you know, we still do that.

Lacy Offutt: Do you have any stories of your ministry that you'd like to share just something that you think-?

Rev. Laura Thompson: I have so many.

Lacy Offutt: Hard to choose?

Rev. Laura Thompson: Yeah, um, because sometimes we uh, encounter, we have people in our church, who have been on drugs. And uh, God delivered them off of them. They didn't have to go through no 12 step program or anything like that. And uh, I work very closely, you know uh you know when they come- I don't know I have so many stories. I really don't know where to start telling you, But uh, we have um marriage uh, classes. We have um, college and career classes. Um, what all do we not do? I don't know let me tell you, let me see what I can think of.

I think uh, one of the greatest things that has happened uh, when we were in uh, Nashville. We had people who have brought, come to us, and maybe they have been going through some things. Maybe on our part we just really stood with them and prayed for them. And uh, one young lady who had to have a liver, and uh you know- she got her liver. And uh, she's doing fine, she's married, had babies since she had the liver. So those kind of things are what sticks out to me, uh we've had people who've been coming here lately. Have been attending our church they have been diagnosed with cancer and God healed them. One time in particular all we done was prayed and stood with them and believed he Word of God, we prayed a prayer of faith. You know that if you could just believe, touch and (agree?). So we did. And uh, we've had kids here, you know, if they having problems – we have been called to Sheffield High School. If they have anger management problems and things like that. We still deal with kids like that.

Um, we have ministries who have come out from us. We have churches we cover, people who've started churches in different areas. We have uh, people in Memphis, a church in Memphis, a couple of churches in Decatur, Huntsville and uh, Bolivar, Tennessee. These people are colored but uh there's so many things that I really just don't know where to start. Uh, my daughter works for UNA. She's a teacher up there.

Lacy Offutt: In what subject?

Rev. Laura Thompson: Hmm?

Lacy Offutt: In what subject?

Rev. Laura Thompson: Math. Margret Murreys?

Lacy Offutt: Haven't had her.

Rev. Laura Thompson: Oh, well um they said she couldn't have no babies but she has 6 kids. *laughs* Um, the doctor told her because of-something was like whatever- but anyway we prayed. She had a boy and then about a couple years later she said she wanted to have another baby. And uh, they said that uh-so anyway she went to the doctor and she ended up with quadruplets. *laughs.* And they said that one of the babies would have spinal bifida-and uh the little girl. There's three boys and one girl-that's them. *pulls out picture*

Lacy Offutt: Awww.

Rev. Laura Thompson: She had 3 boys and 1 girl, and uh they said that the little girl would have spinal bifida. And we were in the doctor's office in Huntsville and I prayed. And I said that's not what God said to me. And uh, so when they had the little baby she had no spinal bifida. All of them are just fine.

Lacy Offutt: That's got to be fun to watch-

Rev. Laura Thompson: Yes.

Lacy Offutt: -having all those kids.

Rev. Laura Thompson: So uh, last year, they weren't trying to have a baby and they had a baby. *laughs* So it's like-I look at what people say is impossible. That's what I say is possible with God you know, um that's what I see. So there's been so many things have happened. Oh, one of the greatest things that I'm doing now- I have the opportunity to teach at New Destiny Bible College. And, and to see people's lives change from the time they come- is an ever growing story.

You know, uh, my assistant pastor used to-when I first met him, for example. He had a joint in his pocket. *laughs* And I said- what's that, that you have in your pocket? You know we just talking. And you know he starts, you know so- but I seen his life change. I've seen him come from a place-of being in the streets- to really, to being an upstanding citizen. You know who have children, a wife, you know, good job, you know and bought a *indistinct* houses, doing things like that. So my story just- I just have so many.

Lacy Offutt: Too many lives touched?

Rev. Laura Thompson: Yeah, you know-when you come and this one comes and I'll tell you what this one came, and this one was going through this right here and then all of a sudden you know, then their lives start really changing and turning. And those are the kind of life changing stories that we have. I mean, you know, it's, it's not that I don't have any- I have so many I just don't know which one I, you know, need to tell. Because some is still happening, people's lives are still been changing and still being affected.

Even since we've been here, you know, people's lives have just been you know been changed. And we have always wanted a place where we could have grass. Where we could get outside and play, sometimes we have uh-Unity in the Community thing where we just buy the big jump things and balloons and just invite the neighborhoods- and come and get hotdogs no charge, you know? *coughs* Excuse me. And then we do, you know, we have hotdogs so we just do a carwash- and don't charge the neighbors or nothing like that. Just because we just trying to you know-get people to know this is what we're here for. You know and you know for them to really come and check us out.

We just not a traditional church and you know, we, we try to get involved with people's lives; because we want their lives to change. We have a lot of students from UNA. Some of the African students they come here and uh,-not only them but we just have all kinds. We just have folk coming. We are open door. We don't- it's not about color- cause we don't have a black church. We don't have a white church. We just got church! Just an individual; so you know, I've had- you know we do we still have multi-race, multi-culture. So it's just something we do. I'd be happy to show you around the church you know and you know um, I don't know if you want to take pictures. I didn't know what you wanted to do. *coughs* Excuse me, I just been having this- What else do you want to know?

Lacy Offutt: I think we've covered most of it.

Rev. Laura Thompson: Oh, ok. Well I'm gonna try and get you all this other information so you can read it and see if there's anything else- you know how to get in contact, me I'm gonna text you. You know, but um I just think that uh, one of the most exciting things about my life. I will tell you this- is to hear a word from the Bible or a story from the Bible and make it so simple but yet relevant to individuals.

We have been talking about a little simple little thing about distractions. And how distractions, when they come, sometimes we just, we just panic. When a distraction comes we just- Why does God have a *indistinct* and all this- and if you just take the time and see why that distraction is there, because sometimes distractions come and you know, you know to try and pull you off course. But when you can be so focused to know that this, this is not going-this is not going to stop me.

This is just like a hurdle. You have to learn how to pace yourself. That when that runner is running, he knows exactly when that next hurdle is coming, and he knows it; but they have to go through this period of training, providing their bodies with strength and nutrients and developing the muscles and stuff and they get so used to jumping. Until they have a stride, you understand what I'm saying? And when they have this stride- that they, that they are easily, can come over this, and they know how many steps in between the next hurdle and they can stride over that. But then sometimes you may catch a cramp. Do you stop? Doing what you do? No, you learn how to work to condition your body and so that you will not put your body in a un-un-un movable situation. But you put it in so that on the next time you maybe didn't finish it, but you gonna go and you gonna try it again.

But when you go to get ready to try it again to get in this stride- you make sure that you that you, you know, don't get-you know how you get before you exorcise? You loosen up. Well, your loosening up comes through by the word of God, so that it can prepare you to be able to deal with whatever hurdle. You see what I'm saying? Because usually before you catch a cramp you always have a signal, a warning sign. So we just have to pay attention to the warning signs. So

that we don't let ourselves get caught up. So one of the things I've learned is about being able to take the Word of God, and see that Word, that when the distractions come, and I know they will.

But I don't let distraction cause me to quit, I let it cause me to persevere. You know I may have to go another route but I'm going to get to where my goal is. And I –what I've found is that a lot of times people give up, upon themselves because of something that happened. But it's only just a distraction and you have to get up and you have to persevere. You have to move on but don't ever stop. Don't ever quit.

Lacy Offutt: Sounds like a pretty good summary of your life and of your church.

Rev. Laura Thompson: Yeah, that's right! Yeah, yeah, oh that's my daughter I'm gonna get her to give you some other stuff so maybe it can fill in, you know.