

The River and the Road:

100 Years of Awakening

*The following history is adapted from a message Pastor Nick Padovani shared on **September 7, 2025**, during the 100 Year Celebration of **The Almond Branch**. It tells the story of God's incredible faithfulness among us—and offers a prophetic glimpse of things yet to come.*

Rome, Technology, and the Kingdom

I want to share some remarkable things about the past, but before we go back, let's look at the future—to something Jesus himself declared would most *definitely* happen:

*This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations ("ethnos": people groups), **and then** the end will come.*

(Matthew 24:14)

Jesus said the greatest sign of his coming is not earthquakes, blood moons (even though one of those is happening tonight), or wars or rumors of war. The greatest sign of "the end" would be the release of Good News to every people group on the planet. This is so significant and so beautiful, and there's something important here for us. However, let's first step back and look into the past for a little bit.

I want to go *all the way* back to 2,000 years ago, to something that happened right before the first coming of Jesus. Right before Jesus arrived on the scene, there was a breakthrough of human engineering called the **Roman Road system**. This connected

ethnos—people groups—like never before. These roads were built so well that many of them still exist today.



The irony is that the Roman Empire thought they were establishing a permanent kingdom, but they had no idea they were actually preparing the way for all nations to receive the news of the true King of kings. It would be just a few decades after the Roman Road system peaked in its development that the Messiah would be born. Thirty something years after that, the Holy Spirit came like a rushing river that went out from Jerusalem, flowed down Roman Roads, and flooded the entire planet.

There is an interesting parallel between technological breakthroughs and the unfolding of heaven's plans on earth. They are intricately linked. 1500 years after the River of God broke loose, another major technological breakthrough happened called the printing press. The man who created this technology was named Johannes Gutenberg and his priority was to get the Gospel out into the world.

Once again, a technological breakthrough was divinely timed because **the Reformation** came on the heels of this invention. When the River of the Spirit initially began to make its way across the nations, there were those who tried to control the River, and box it in. They didn't realize this would only create stagnant religious ponds everywhere. Thus, the printing press became a way to bring a fresh message of transforming grace to the world even faster.

There are lots of examples of the River moving outside the bounds of man's religious ponds, but one of the biggest examples came about 400 years later, in April of 1906 (in California of all places). What is now known as the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement came from a sovereign move of the River in a small gathering at a building on Azusa Street in Los Angeles. Asuza Street is known for a fresh outbreak of the gift of tongues, but there were so many other miracles that happened then. In fact, one of the biggest miracles that people were in awe over was the sight of black men and white men joining hand in hand, worshipping Jesus together. It was truly something way outside of man's systems.

West Milford

This move of the Spirit at Asuza went on to spark the fastest growing movement of faith in the history of the world. Amazingly, this involved another intersection between the Kingdom of God and a breakthrough in technology. This intersection is what will lead us to our story in West Milford, New Jersey.

A few months after Asuza Street—in December of 1906—the first broadcast went out from a ship at sea through a new technology called the radio. ***Fun fact here:*** *Did you know the first song ever played on the radio was a glorious worship song called **O Holy Night**? This was followed by a declaration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Once again, new world-changing technology was inaugurated with Scripture.*

So, with this new move of the Spirit—and new technology to support it—the Gospel and its power began to go across the nation in new ways. Eventually it hit a little town in New Jersey (actually, a big town geographically—the second largest in the State) called West Milford. One of the first people in the area to own a radio in their home was the Arnold

family who lived on Marshall Hill Road. Eric Arnold had been a radio operator on a ship and knew how to use one.

Eric's wife was a young woman named Gertrude who had been deathly sick for many months. She was battling what she called "cystic poisoning" at the time. Amongst other serious issues, the doctors had given her pretty much no hope of survival. She was sent home from the hospital in November of 1923 and stayed in bed for months. During this time, the radio came into the house, and her husband would carry her downstairs to listen to this new strange device.

There was a broadcast that came on Sunday afternoons at 3:00pm from New York City. It was operated by a ministry called "Glad Tidings." Gertrude started listening to this when at one point the preacher said on the air: *"If anyone has anything wrong with them who is listening in the 'radio congregation'—if you will place your hand on the afflicted part of your body, we will pray for you... And remember, if God sees us, he sees you."*

She had never heard anything like this before, but suddenly a Voice spoke in her heart, saying, ***"This is for you."*** That day, Gertrude Arnold received a full healing. Within two weeks she was driving herself around, living a completely normal life, and went on to outlive most of her family members. There are people here today (in 2025) who still remember her. There's even a road in our town named after her son, Private John Eric Arnold, who died fighting in World War II.

After she was healed, the Arnolds began inviting other families over to listen to this weekly broadcast. The River of the Spirit began to break loose as families were drawn to Jesus. It was in July of the following year, 1925, that this little group decided to start having their own meeting for worship. There were three families in particular—the Arnolds, the Westerns, and the Rhinesmiths—who rotated their homes for church meetings. Since it was in the afternoons and not Sunday mornings, people from other



churches began coming. Gertrude's home on Marshall Hill became known as the "Holy Roller Corner." It was totally outside the box of the regular Sunday experience, and it went on like that for about **twelve years**—until 1938.

A New Season

The group grew so much that they decided to rent space from an old dance hall right next to the Arnold home. From 1938 until 1950—another **twelve-year period**—they gathered on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday evenings. The hall burned down at one point, so they moved to an old bungalow owned by Gertrude's father. During this time, there were several pastors came that came and led the services. Then, in 1950, a big change occurred. A man named Elmer Lindale accepted the call to pastor this group of believers, and on November 6 of that year they decided to incorporate as an official "church" and join the Assemblies of God. The church became known at that point as the *West Milford Full Gospel Assembly* and within a few years (1953), they were able to purchase their own building. This is the old Methodist church on Greenwood Lake Turnpike.



184 Marshall Hill: Tragedy and Hope

This was followed by another **twelve-year season** with two other pastors leading the congregation. Later, in 1962, things began to change for the church both locally and nationally. It was during this time that the name was shortened to *West Milford Assembly of God* and a man named William (Bill) Myer accepted the call as pastor. Bill and his wife Ruth began to see some significant breakthrough in the area, and this led to the desire to get a larger building. As a result, they purchased three acres of land on 184 Marshall Hill Road (in 1968).



Pastor Myer at Dedication Service

There is a significant side-story to this. I was able to speak with a wonderful woman named Bonnie who was a young girl at the time this all took place. Her name was Bonnie Little and her family went to the church when it was at the old location. The family had suffered a horrible tragedy on Pinecliff Lake, a few minutes from the church. Her ten-year-old brother Wayne was ice-skating when the ice began to crack and break. She was there when he fell in, calling to him as he went under the water, and watching as he was carried away. Bonnie told me that as he was being swept away, she heard him shout out in that moment, *"I can see Jesus!"* Those were his last words...

That night, her father (who was not a believer at the time) had an experience with God. This tragedy, instead of tearing him apart, led to him completely dedicating himself to the Lord. His name was Robert Little and he was the son of the mayor of the town. Robert and his father became instrumental in helping the Myers purchase the property on Marshall Hill. In fact, he was there day and night helping to build the foundation of the church.

This past June (2025), I was able to make contact with Ruth Myer, who is now in her 90s. During the conversation, she happened to inform me of how the land was purchased from the local water company. This blew my mind because the same week we had this conversation, I closed on a *four-year long process* of selling some land back to a new water company. It just happened to be the same week of the closing that her and I connected over the phone and she shared this information. But what made it so powerful is that this happened during our “*Double Jubilee Year*,” where we had been teaching about the year of Jubilee and how land is *returned to its original owner* (Leviticus 27:24). This was a tremendous sign of God restoring his original purposes, which are way bigger than the property itself. Ultimately, God is calling us back to the River—back to the water of the Spirit flowing freely (hence, the “water company” connection).

Jesus Revolution

Ruth Myer went on to share about the incredible things that happened soon after the purchase of the property in the late 60s. Throughout the country, the River was moving again. Out of a wild and chaotic time in the 1960s—culturally and politically—a new Charismatic movement was being ignited, leading up to a period known as the Jesus Revolution. God began moving particularly amongst young people.

It was during this time that the church started something called the *Teen Coffee House*. On Friday nights, teenagers from all over the area come for worship and coffee. Sometimes, there were over 100 kids in the building.



At one point, the local school district became very much aware of what was going on and was skeptical about the whole thing; however,

they saw the impact it was having on kids—because teenagers were getting their lives turned around—so they began to publicly support it.

During these Coffee House nights, young people would gather for music and hang out, but there was an “upper room” where those kids could come, if they wanted, to receive prayer. Many came and were filled with the Holy Spirit in that room and were completely transformed. Recently, the Lord has brought back some of the people who were touched during this time, and we have felt this is another sign of God restoring things from the past—and preparing us for another Jesus Revolution (coming on the heels of a chaotic season in our nation, both politically and culturally).

Once again, God’s Spirit was moving outside the confines of regular Sunday church. The church was supporting it, but a lot of activity in the Spirit was happening more on Fridays than Sundays. Eventually the Myers left after about **twelve years**. In 1975, a pastor named Robert Sarrichio assumed responsibility of the church. He came in for a few years before the church entered into one of its most dramatic changes yet...

Christian Life Center & Apostolic Vision

In September of 1979, Pastor Pat Fiore and his wife Susan came into leadership with a church of only **twelve** members at the time (yes, *twelve*). You might wonder why only twelve people were there after that previous season. It’s sad to say that, in spite of the fruitfulness, there was division, church politics, a church split, etc. As so often happens, people were trying to box in the River. Nonetheless, after Pastor Pat came on, new life began to flow into the place. Within about three years, the church grew from twelve to about 250 people.

By the early 1980s, the facilities were inadequate once again, and so the church purchased an additional four acres to build the current sanctuary. There were woods all around the church, so Pat and the elders would go out and lay hands on the trees, claiming it for the Kingdom. Through some more incredible circumstances, they were able to buy the land (for a ridiculously low price) and expand the church. On Easter Sunday 1985, the church entered the new sanctuary and adopted the name Christian Life Center—CLC.



Pastor Fiore (middle) with two board members

This is where we start tuning into something significant for today—and where we're headed. This CLC season was the time that *apostolic vision* began to take root. That language was not always used, but the vision of this place being an apostolic hub began to emerge. What this means is that there was a deep sense that this was not meant to be a normal Sunday gathering with typical church events—but more of a training center, and a spiritual watering hole. A place where people from all over could encounter the presence and voice of God in significant ways and then be sent forth into their respective communities and beyond.

And so, a word came to this house over and over from separate voices throughout the years that this place was called to be an **Antioch Church**. This resurfaced recently through a visiting minister who came on Father's Day (2025) for the first time. He had no idea about this history, but he prophesied the words *Antioch Church* over the community. Antioch in the book of Acts is where prophets, teachers, and believers gathered. They ministered to the Lord, went deep into worship, and from that place the Spirit of God gave fresh revelation and birthed new missions movements.

This vision began to blossom in the late 80s. In March of 1986, a School of Ministry was launched with accredited Bible classes. The vision of the School was to train and equip the saints for ministry according to Ephesians 4:11. Two years after the School launched, the church pioneered something else substantial—*Agapè Child Care Center*. This is still here today (2025), 40 years later. It has become a wonderful resource to the community and one of the best places for childcare in the region.

Renewal & Blessing

Another season came and went, then a new shift hit the church in middle of the 1990s. At the time, the leadership had been trying to plan new ways to reach the community. Like many churches in that time, they were engaged in what is known as a “seeker-sensitive” model. This was a blessing in many places, but in our case, the River of God interrupted these plans. This was clearly a call back to the spiritual roots of the church. Instead of Los Angeles, this time a move of the Spirit was happening north of us in Canada through what became known as the *Toronto Blessing*. People were experiencing powerful manifestations of the Spirit, which included a lot of laughter and a lot of inner healing—all rooted in the Father’s love.

Pastor Pat and some of the elders went up to Toronto with a lot of skepticism. They wanted to see it firsthand, and Pastor Pat ending up having a very intense encounter where he spent hours on the floor weeping over the love of the Father. This shifted much of his ministry at the time. It was truly a fresh release of the River and it was carried back here, breaking loose at CLC around October of 1995. This involved a strong relationship with a nearby church (Bethany Church). The two churches began hosting monthly Renewal Conferences in 1996 and had numerous international guest speakers coming through.

There was a further expansion of the vision of being an apostolic hub, a place that hosts and honors the presence of the Lord. Prophetic voices like John Paul Jackson and Graham Cooke felt strongly called by God to visit this place.¹ A number of these ministers spoke into the apostolic vision on the house and saw great expansion coming. They affirmed that this was never meant to be a typical “church.” Graham Cooke in particular declared that this would be a “forerunner church” that would pioneer things in the Spirit and follow the River wherever it went.

Always Redeeming

It is important to mention that the church went through a lot during this season. There are ebbs and flows to the River—that’s how water works on the rough land of human hearts. I’ve heard incredible stories over the years: real miracles, signs, and wonders were taking place. I wasn’t part of the church during the time, but I’ve gotten to know a lot of people from that era. Many are still here, and they are all a bunch of misfits; a ragtag group that God brought through CLC over the years—some to stay and some to be sent forth. (And some to be sent forth and then come back again.) It’s been a beautiful work of the Holy Spirit. But there was a lot of pain as well. Many left the church at one point. I have had the privilege of watching God bring healing to different people who were involved in this season. It’s been remarkable. The enemy comes in, but God is always redeeming what was lost.

One last thing about the CLC season: There was another attempt toward the end of that time to engage with the community in a more open way. This is why the leadership

¹ At the time, Graham Cooke had a strong relationship with Pat Fiore, basing his U.S. office at CLC. Years later, when Nick Padovani became the pastor, the Lord sovereignly connected him with Mark Iles, a prophetic leader Graham Cooke had personally mentored. This connection was unrelated to the previous relationship between Graham and Pat. It was a sovereign connection that evidences the beautiful divine Story unfolding here.

changed the name to *The Journey Church of the Highlands*. A big part of this was about being more connected with the local Highlands region. God did a lot in that “Journey Church” season, connecting us with other churches and building much stronger relationships with the town. The “Faith in Action” campaign, sparked by elders Roland and Jackie Bauer, was a tremendous part of this.

Nick’s Story

I am going to pick up the story in 2011 when Pastor Pat announced that after 33 years, he was going to be leaving the church to pastor somewhere else. Something absolutely incredible happened the day before he made this announcement.

I had been a youth pastor here, but for several reasons I had left the church about two years prior. Pat and I had a very healing meeting the day before he made the announcement—which *I had no idea about*. We had planned a meeting just to reconnect. Two days before our meeting—on a Thursday evening while I was driving home from a class in my master’s program—I had a vision where I saw myself not just coming back to the church, but being the pastor of it! (I immediately dismissed it.)

When I met with Pat two days later, I figured we would just touch base and catch up on life. I wasn’t going to mention the vision at all. At the end of our time together, he told me, *“Nick, by the way, I want to you to hear this from me before it’s public. I know you haven’t been around here in a while, but I’m announcing tomorrow that I’m leaving the church to pastor another community... And we’re not sure where God is taking things...”*

And the rest is history... God confirmed things so strongly in the next few months that God was calling me to come back and step into leadership. This started a year of transition. Then, on January 6, 2013, I was officially installed—which was **twelve years ago**. Yes, we have just gone through another twelve-year season as of the time of this message.



Nick's Ordination Service

When I connected with Gertrude Arnold's grandson, he supplied me with a document written by Gertrude that told the original history of the church. Through that document, I found out that I am the **12th pastor** since its inception. When I had been researching and preparing for this message, I was already seeing the number twelve come up in many ways. So, this really got my attention—and I'll share momentarily what I feel the Lord spoke to my heart about this. This is not about me—*it's about something crucial God has been preparing for generations.*

First, let's quickly catch up on the most recent season of time. In 2014, we blessed the Assemblies of God and they blessed us as we felt the call to become an independent church with a vision to be intimately connected to the larger Body of Christ. Within these past twelve years, the original vision behind Christian Life Center began to be resurrected, and the call into the River has only intensified. This is what led to our last name change. Before we talk about *The Almond Branch* and wrap this up, I have to share another incredible way God aligned my own story with this church.

His Sovereign Hands

A few years after I became the pastor, Alene Rhinesmith, the administrator for over 25 years, randomly found my name on a card from the 1990s. It was a salvation card from a

time that I had completely forgotten about. It was from 1997 when I was about 10 years old. At the time, I lived with my dad in New York, but I would visit West Milford because my mom and stepdad had recently moved there. Not long before this, my stepdad Brian had a radical born again experience and began bringing our family to different churches. On one Sunday we checked out Christian Life Center—but we got freaked out and never came back! Nonetheless, Pastor Pat Fiore did an altar call that day. Brian turned to me and asked if I wanted to go up, to which I replied, “Sure...” And I went up to receive the Lord as someone up front led me in a prayer.

Like I said, we never came back. Years later, I had a true awakening to Jesus in Long Island while in college. I moved back to West Milford and returned to a job that I had been working throughout high school. It turned out that just two weeks before I came back, the place had created a brand-new position and hired a woman who turned out to be a radical Jesus-lover.

Her name was Betty Zittel, and she soon became a spiritual mom to me. She also played one of the most pivotal roles in my wife’s and my journey. Betty was a member of the infamous CLC. She invited me to come and visit the church. When I did, I absolutely loved it this time around, because now I was a full-on believer and I felt the presence of God in a way I hadn’t felt elsewhere.

So, years later, after I become the lead pastor of the church through a wild set of circumstances (I didn’t even scratch the surface before), my administrator finds an old card from this time that I had forgotten about—that one visit where I received the Lord in 1997. The card was signed by the man who prayed for me that day...

The name was *Joe Zittel*, the husband of the woman who would become my spiritual mom!

There is not enough space here to describe how incredible it is that the place I received Christ is the place I ended up becoming a pastor years later—sovereignly.²

A Tree of Awakening

What I want to celebrate and proclaim today is the bigger story God is weaving. He has been doing this for a very long time, and it is leading somewhere...

This takes us to the name *The Almond Branch*. In the Hebrew, the almond tree can be translated as the *Tree of Awakening*. Some know the story of how much I struggled over this name. The day we announced it—to a response of awkward silence!—there was an incredible sense of awe that eventually came over the church as we finished the service. A silence that was only broken by the sweet voice of singing. (See *Addendum at the end for the full story*.)

Something else remarkable happened that day, which brings me back to Alene Rhinesmith. After the name change announcement (and the events that transpired at the close of service), it just so happened that Alene and her husband Russ were celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary (Jubilee!). During the celebration, Russ pulled me aside to share a dream he had many years prior.

In the dream, Russ walked into the church sanctuary and saw a young, immature almond tree growing in the middle of it. Out of nowhere, an axe appeared and violently struck the tree. Instead of hurting it, however, the strike caused it to grow. This happened

² This sovereign connection gets even crazier with the history of Nick's wife, Kelly. After getting married, Nick discovered that Kelly's family had been an instrumental part of the church decades prior. He didn't know this at first because the family had left the church many years beforehand. Nick's father-in-law informed him that his own father had been instrumental in the hiring of Pat Fiore. 33 years later, Pat would be the main one to bring on Nick!

several times, and each time the axe struck the tree, it would get more and more mature. It went from barren, to having branches with leaves, to a full blossoming stature.

I had no idea about this when I announced the name. What this spoke to me is that all along God had truly planted a Tree of Awakening here. This was his work from the beginning and—as God says to Jeremiah—he is still watching over his word to fulfill it! This what God said to Jeremiah when he showed him a vision of an almond branch (Jeremiah 1:11). Even though there have many been “strikes” (and prunings, and difficult seasons), all of it has been leading toward a *jubilee* of redemption. In the midst of the crushing, God has been making new wine. He has been strengthening our root system. He’s been building a foundation for something. *And yes, God can work in minutes, but often he works in centuries.*

This brings me to the number **twelve**... In the book of Revelation, twelve is the number of foundation stones in the city of the New Jerusalem. On the stones are written the names of twelve apostles (21:14). In Ephesians, the apostles and prophets are called the foundation of the church (2:20). Twelve is the number of apostolic foundation. I believe this is affirming the apostolic and prophetic calling that has been on this house from the beginning—and we’re just stepping into a season of unparalleled fruitfulness and blossoming.

Where We Are Headed

The River of God is moving again, and it is beyond what we can imagine. It is beyond what we can control and even plan for. I believe the past is speaking into the present, and I want to submit three things that I believe, by the Spirit of the Lord, God is highlighting to us:

#1: The Roman Road system, the printing press, and the radio all synchronized with world-changing moves of God. So it is with the internet, live-streaming, and even AI (as scary as that is for people). Through new technology, the Gospel in its fullness is going to go forth, and Jesus's promise of every people group hearing the Good News is going to be fulfilled. The revelation of Christ's finished work is going to be proclaimed in all nations—and then the end will come.

Before that happens though, the River is going to continue breaking through man's walls and denominational barriers. A true manifestation of ***Christ in us*** is going to arise. And just like the River hit a young woman's house in the middle of nowhere in New Jersey in the 1920s, so will this River hit people's homes with technology playing a part in the new 20s (and into the 2030s). In those encounters, new gatherings of worship and communion are going to be birthed all over the place. We believe we are called to be an apostolic support system in the midst of it. We are not the center—Jesus is the center. We just get to be part of it.

#2: The Teen Coffee House of the 1970s is pointing to something God is redeeming today. **There is a new Jesus Revolution rising.** God is going to birth new and creative outreaches that make space for people—including young people—to connect outside of the normal "church" environment. There are going to be out-of-the-box ministries that get ignited, and many listening to this are called to be part of it. The calling of an apostolic hub is to help equip the Body for all of this. This is a big part of where we're headed.

#3: Finally, we come back to where we started. The Lord has done something sovereignly here in this church in regard to the mission field. Over the last seven years, we have been connecting—by no intentional effort of our own—with Spirit-led, pioneering ministries that are involved with a vision called **Back to Jerusalem**.

Interestingly, this vision is something God gave to the Chinese church in the 1920s. The same time a small group of believers were gathering in Gertrude Arnold's home in West Milford, there was a small group of Christians in China gathering in homes and receiving something world-changing from the Holy Spirit.



(Remember, God is weaving a story bigger than all of us.)

The Lord showed this group his promise in Matthew 24:14—that *the Gospel of the Kingdom shall go to all people groups before the end*. The vision was about completing the Great Commission by equipping Asian believers to bring the Gospel to the countries between China and Israel—all the way back to where this whole thing started in Jerusalem. The countries between China and Israel just so happen to contain the last remaining *ethnos* who have yet to hear the Gospel. The hinge of human history hangs on that region of the world. It's often called the 10/40 window, based on its longitude and latitude coordinates.

This vision went out from China in the 1920s, but it died in 1950 when the Communist Party arose and struck down Christianity in China. *But like the almond tree in Russ Rhinesmith's dream, this only led to explosive growth*. This is because Christianity went underground and multiplied everywhere. Through the decades that followed—with some of the most intense persecution imaginable—the church of China grew strong. And it grew by the millions! Then, years later in the 1980s, the vision was resurrected and given to a newly strengthened church in Asia. *God was watching over his word to finish it.*

Now, here's where this connects with us. Several years ago, the Lord had been speaking to my heart about this Back to Jerusalem movement. I was even writing about it, but had no direct relationship with anyone involved. The same year we announced the name change, I was invited out of the blue to minister to leaders from the underground church of China. Something happened there that I've talked about elsewhere—I'll just share what happened a few years later...

I was approached by Alex Seidler, who is the son of two key leaders in this house—Rich and Martha Seidler. Alex told me how God had connected him with the son of one of the founders of the Back to Jerusalem movement! He asked me to come on behalf of the Almond Branch to help plant one of the first apostolic hubs in that region of the world. I went on behalf of the church as an apostolic and prophetic support of what Jesus was already doing. Incredible...

Again, Jesus is the Center.

And he is going to finish what he started.

Jesus is watching over his Word and he is weaving together a story that is bigger than any of us—yet it includes all of us. It even includes our weaknesses. Even the tragedies, like the loss of a son in a lake (or in church splits, or in the persecution of a nation), he takes all of it and weaves it into something beautiful. And before this thing is over, we are going to stand in awe at how the Gospel changed the world—and how we were called to be part of it.

To everyone reading this, you are part of it as well. God is raising up an Antioch Church all over. Even if you hold the smallest piece of thread, it is still part of his tapestry—and that tapestry wouldn't be complete without your part. So may the Lord reveal more of his heart for you, and more of your place in his advancing Kingdom! Amen.

Addendum: The Day We Announced the Name Change

In August of 2017, I was on a plane coming back from a trip to California (not far from Asuza Street). I asked God for clarity on this name that I was wrestling with—"Almond Branch." Right after that, I heard an audible voice: *"I've already given you clarity, Peter."* When I heard "Peter," I was instantly reminded of the apostle Peter when he was lovingly and yet firmly challenged by the Lord. I felt like God was saying, *"I've already spoken clearly to you about the Almond Branch..."* At that very moment, the woman on my right pulled out a *huge bag of almonds*. (Like Costco huge—I don't even know how she got it on her carry-on.)

This was the straw that broke the camel's back (or cracked the nut)! Two months later, October of 2017, we announced the new name that would be implemented in the following year. When I shared the new name with the church, I was giving a message on the meaning of the almond tree. At the end of the message, the presence of God was palpable in the room. I remained silent for a few moments when someone came forward to share something they felt God put on their heart. This was Sherri Parlotto, an intercessor who had been part of the church for many years, and who God had brought back after a long season away.

Sherri had this sense God was speaking the phrase *"seven weeks."* She didn't know what it meant. She just shared it and sat back down. After this, another person came forward—Mike MacDonald. He told everyone that all week he was drawn to a picture on the wall at his office that showed a *seven-week-old* embryo. He also said he had no idea what this meant.

So, with those two things shared, we just sat and waited, not sure what God was saying. I began praying and asking God to reveal more. Finally, our family pastors—Jeff and Renee Gunther—slowly started walking up to the front of the church. In a somewhat

hesitant manner, they took the mic from me and said: *"We weren't going to say anything because it's so early—but we just found out there is a **seven-week-old** embryo inside of Renee right now."*

At that moment, we just erupted with awe that God was so obviously speaking. We entered into this holy silence that only broke when this wonderful older saint (someone we also miss dearly, who God brought back to this place after leaving many years prior—Pat Montalbano) began singing with the sweetest voice. She sang a hymn and the whole congregation joined in as the peace of God settled over us. It was an unforgettable moment. (I came to find out later on that she had an almond tree planted in her front yard, which is somewhat of a strange thing for West Milford.)

This whole encounter was followed by Russ Rhinesmith sharing his dream from many years prior about an almond tree growing in the sanctuary. In 2025, at the time of this celebration, it's been seven years since the name was officially changed. Seven is the number of branches on the almond tree that Moses was told to design. We know it as the menorah, the seven-branched lampstand.

Seven is the number of **completion**. It speaks to **the finished work of Christ**, the ultimate message God has called us to carry into the world. In the end, the "almond branch" is all about *Christ in us*, the hope of glory, coming forth as a light to the nations.

This was always the calling—to be a Tree of Awakening with a beautiful vision that goes back 100—rather, 2000 years.