

# Unconditional:

How one Colorado church discovered the power of **love**

**N**ot much of what Larry Baker tells you makes sense — unless, of course, you believe God can transform, restore, call, gift and heal a man.

It's a crisp autumn morning in Fort Collins, Colo. Colorful leaves float on the cool air before hitting the street and skittering away. Inside Headturners, the salon he owns, Baker thanks a client, sweeps up hair clippings and then heads out the door.

"Every day I walk my beat," he says as he makes a beeline for a pool hall across the street. "I'm looking to hug some necks and make some new friends, which I've found often leads to people wanting to ask me about my beliefs."

Baker has spent much of his adult life rubbing elbows and sharing his faith with unchurched people. Fort Collins, a college town, is a perfect place to do so. It sits on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains and brims with well-visited bars, trendy restaurants and eclectic shops. Independence and ruggedness run through the locals like copper and lead run through the Rockies.

It's estimated that only 35 percent of Coloradans attend church. Some people say the superabundance of outdoor activities is to blame for the paltry number of churchgoers. Hiking, skiing, rafting and biking can fill any given Sunday, depending on the weather. Intellectualism, postmodernism, affluence, materialism, sheer stubbornness and even mysticism might play into it as well. Some residents will even tell you that the influx of people from the West Coast has liberalized the state.

By Kirk Noonan  
Photography  
by Gaylon Wampler



Baker has never been one to concern himself with why people don't go to church. Doing so, he says, would run contrary to his *modus operandi*, which is to try to uncon-

Eventually, Nikki asked Baker if she could go to church with him at First Assembly of God Church, now known as Timberline Church. At the end of a Sunday morning

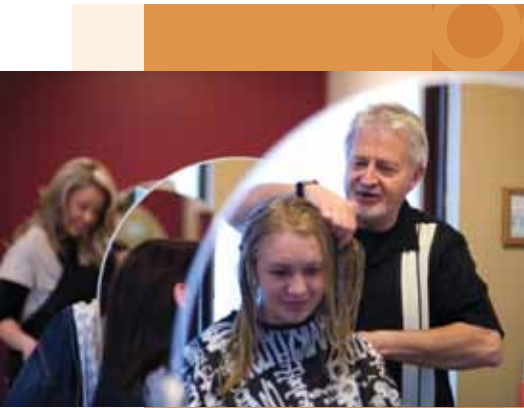
a reputation. Long before Nikki came to the church and started bringing her friends — many of whom had colorful pasts like hers — Northrop says the church had

church into the situation intentionally. It was an accident that God divinely orchestrated.” Some longtime members felt the church was being overrun by sin-

people and bikers were planned. Funds were redirected to help those in need. Leaders and laypeople looked for ways to make an impact in their community.

// But when we landed on *let love live*, it seemed like everything else faded and the things that happened in the church began to truly revolve around the *greatest commandment*. //

— Dary Northrop



ditionally love everyone he meets. “Everyone is looking for the same thing,” he contends as he pulls open the door to the pool hall. “But some of them just don't know what that is.”

In 1993, that could have been said of Nikki\*. She was a barely 5-foot-tall, 21-year-old exotic dancer who met Baker when she went to him for a haircut. As he cut her hair he made small talk and learned she was a pre-law student at Colorado State University who was financing her education by dancing at one of Denver's most popular strip clubs.

Over time the two became good friends. Nikki seemed to identify with the older Baker who openly talked about three tragedies that had transformed his life and shaped his faith.

Four years earlier Baker had severely injured his back while playing golf. After a relatively routine surgery he suffered paralysis. A year later, his best friend committed suicide. Two years after that, his wife left him.

*Son, this is going to be tougher than the paralysis, tougher even than Jack's death,* Baker recalls God telling him. *If you're going to get through this, you'll have to stay closer to Me than ever before.*

Baker did. In doing so, he says, he became convinced that everything that had happened had led him to a point where he could share Christ's love unconditionally with people like Nikki.

One night Nikki inquired how Baker could love people unconditionally. He told her a story about Jesus, and the next day he gave her a Bible.

service, Dary Northrop, lead pastor of the church, asked if anyone wanted to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

“I looked over at Nikki, and she had her hand held high and tears running down her face,” Baker says. “She made a commitment that morning that would change both our lives.”

It would change the church too.

### Conflict resolution

Though the sun is out in full force, a light breeze carries enough bite to let seasoned Coloradans know winter is near. Sports enthusiasts don't seem to mind. On many of Fort Collins' thoroughfares bicyclists seem to outnumber motorists. But on this Sunday morning not everyone in the city is pursuing physical fitness.

The second service of the day at Timberline Church is well underway. Thousands of worshippers are packed into the sanctuary — where the main service takes place — or in an adjacent sanctuary known as the Video Venue.

Outside, on a terrace, a handful of men and women sit at picnic tables listening to the service through outdoor speakers. Though each member of the group admits forays into the church are rare, they all agree they feel drawn to the church and seem content listening to sermons on the outdoor speakers.

“You can always feel the presence of the Lord here,” a 40-year-old man says. “They're definitely warm and loving people.”

That's a ringing endorsement for a church whose theme is *let love live*. But if truth be told, Timberline Church has not always had such

grown comfortable and stagnant.

“We were a typical small church with 125 people, three hymns, a full choir with robes, and pot-lucks,” he says. “We were very good taking people out of their real lives and putting them into a religious machine that produced clones.

“But when Nikki began bringing her unchurched friends we had to learn how to accept people with tattoos, skimpy outfits and purple hair,” he continues. “I feared the loss of the structure of what we had known. But I had not led the

ners and felt compelled to voice their displeasure. Rather than try to appease or ignore them, Northrop became a proactive listener.

“I didn't know how to react to the changes that were taking place other than to just listen,” he says. “But when we landed on *let love live*, it seemed like everything else faded and the things that happened in the church began to truly revolve around the greatest commandment.”

Northrop changed the topics he preached on. Outreaches to alcoholics, college students, business-

The basic idea was to embrace as many people in the community as possible with Christ's love.

As a result, the church's demographics began to expand and the congregation grew exponentially. Today, more than 6,000 people attend the church's two campuses on Sundays.

“Dary and the other leaders realized they were getting to be a part of something that they didn't start,” says Dick Foth, a Timberline teaching team member. “And it was their responsibility to fuel it.”

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Top: Larry Baker cuts a client's hair at his Fort Collins salon.

Bottom: Dary Northrop, lead pastor of Timberline Church, preaches during a Sunday service.



Top: Larry Baker often can be found making his rounds in downtown Fort Collins.

Bottom: Some visitors to Timberline prefer the patio to the sanctuary on Sunday mornings.

The result today is a church full of people wired very much like Larry Baker.

**Finding friends**

In the pool hall it smells of stale beer. Though it's well before noon, a handful of barflies sit on stools quietly taking long pulls on large mugs of beer. The place is depressingly quiet. Baker hardly notices. He strolls through the place looking for people he knows.

"None of the regulars I usually talk to are here yet," he finally says with a trace of resignation in his voice. "But it's early. I'll come back later."

Back on the street he ambles down an alley then crosses a parking lot before negotiating a busy intersection. These are not mean streets. Boutiques, microbreweries and restaurants anchor almost every corner. College students strut

down the sidewalks in search of food, things to buy and good times. Like a politician facing a tough race, Baker greets nearly everyone he comes across and spends time chatting up those he knows.

"You don't have to be a great evangelist to share your faith," he says. "God is just asking us to step up to the plate and live a life that shows people we have something they don't — Jesus."

With that said, he ducks into a store and offers to buy the owner a sandwich. **tpe**

*\*Nikki asked that her last name not be used.*

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E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).

ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

**A. Admit you are a sinner.**

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

**Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.**

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

**B. Believe in Jesus** (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

**Become a child of God by receiving Christ.**

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

**C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.**

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

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