

# Dale Sutherland

## The Message

Dale was nineteen years old the day he was idling at a stoplight in Rosslyn, Virginia, watching the pedestrians crossing the street. Suddenly, he was overcome by a sense of deep hopelessness. "I remember wondering, what was the point?" he says today. "It then suddenly became really clear to me that there is hope in this world, and that hope comes from Christ."

In the wake of his epiphany, Dale knew exactly what to do. He decided to commit his life to getting that message of hope to as many people as possible, lifting them from the bleak and disheartening existence that often plagues our days. And, now the Associate Senior Pastor of McLean Bible Church, his feet have never strayed from that path. "God brought me to where I am today," he affirms. "The gospel of Jesus is the message that changed my life and the lives of millions of others. It's the message that all of us are sinners in need of a Savior, and that there's one Savior. Through the grace of God, the sins of man are forgiven."

A successful life journey begins with the first step in the right direction. With the dream of working with urban youth, Dale enrolled in Bible college, working three jobs to afford the tuition. After several years, he decided to finish his education later in life and instead became a policeman to get first-hand experience with the population he sought to serve. "I began to learn the urban world while also serving the Lord and my faith, getting the gospel out in any way I could at work during the day and then in the evening hours," he recounts. "I knew that integrating Christ into my daily work was essential if I was going to reach people, and I dedicated twenty hours a week to serving the Lord outside of work. In this way, I was able to reach people I never would have reached as a pastor."

The mission of McLean Bible Church is to impact the Washington metropolitan area with the

message of Jesus Christ—a purpose divinely aligned with the goal Dale set for his own life at age nineteen. It strives to accomplish this evangelistically, whether by radio, serving others, or other means. It also focuses on discipleship, the idea of nurturing, shepherding, and helping people to begin to walk closer to God so that they grow and learn in Christ.

The Church's main location in Tyson's Corner, Virginia, serves around 7,500 people each weekend. Their Montgomery County campus, which recently merged two separate locations in a new building, has grown by leaps and bounds to around 750 people—a number that increases each week. They also have a campus in Manassas that serves four of the poorest low-income housing project apartment complexes in Prince William County. There, they provide after school programs, food, and clothing, serving children and families as they communicate the Truth to them. Their Arlington campus draws about 300 young adults on Monday evenings, where stories are shared about God's great work in their lives. Finally, Loudon campus is their largest, and the parishioners there focus on reaching low-income people.

Now over fifty years old, McLean Bible also runs an extension of the Dallas Theological Seminary, where classes and graduate courses are available. With all these services taken together, and supplemented by their online campus, the whole Church serves around 14,000 each week. "We're among the largest 20 churches in America—an honor and achievement we never even had our sights set on," he says. "I used to attend when it was just 300 people or so, and we'd just preach the Bible. The growth we've seen and the sheer number of people that have come to us—it's truly a miracle."

Born in Maine as the youngest of three



boys, Dale never imagined growing up that he'd one day be guiding the direction and future of such a prominent religious institution, though some aspects of his upbringing might have suggested as much. His mother, a teacher, was an incredibly hard worker who never relaxed, and his father could quote Scripture to address any problem someone might be having. His older brothers excelled academically and went on to become valedictorians of their classes, but Dale much preferred playing sports and being active. Still, he had a remarkable work ethic and sought out entrepreneurial opportunities even as a young child. Early on, he picked potatoes and strawberries for pocket money. Then he helped friends with their newspaper routes.

Dale's father suffered from bipolar disorder, and the family moved around frequently through Dale's childhood. "Dad always had a good job, and we never missed a meal, but we were always on the road," Dale recounts. "He worked for the State Department, then as the VP of a Christian organization, and finally for U.S. Immigration Services. Through that time, traversing Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Texas, and Brussels, Belgium, I attended five different elementary schools, two different junior high schools, and three different high schools. And I was always miserable the first day at a new school. It was always a trick, figuring out how to fit in in a new place, because they were all so different."

Everything changed when he was fourteen. He had grown up in a Christian home, attending church every Sunday, but it hadn't really clicked for him. The summer before his freshman year of high school, he attended a Christian youth conference, as he had done many times before. Yet this time, as he was learning about meditating on Scripture, he came to Christ and connected with the Lord for the first time. When he returned home to Maine to start school, he felt totally different. "I was already popular, but I became so much more confident," he recalls. "All the fear went away, and I relaxed as I felt purpose in sharing the gospel with folks. All my extra time was spent on the Bible, memorizing Scripture and meditating on God's word. With God, I got along with everyone. It was like true peace, and provided a great foundation in life." Around that time, he began attending McLean Bible Church.

Dale became very focused on his study of the Lord, exhibiting a self discipline completely

alien to most teenagers. If he wanted to watch an hour of TV, he had to spend an hour with God. Around that time, when he was a sophomore, his family moved to the DC metropolitan area. Dale got a work permit and took a job at a rental car company, also continuing his track record of working at radio stations. Between God and part-time jobs, he found time to finish his high school courses early at the age of sixteen. "I stocked up my credits for that," he recalls. "I did not like school, so I worked hard to get done as quickly as possible."

Upon graduation, Dale got a job at the Sheraton National Hotel in Arlington, the downtown Hyatt Regency, and the Marriott. He moved on to hotel security, where he had the opportunity to talk long hours with the police officers on duty. Deeply moved by their stories and by the opportunity to work with a population that could benefit tremendously from God's teachings, he decided to apply to the police academy when he was 21. He had also met a wonderful woman at Washington Bible College, Patricia, and the two had decided to get married. He was ready to start a career and see where God's plan would take him.

For over two years, Dale was worked with the police department in Arlington County. He then spent the rest of his 28-year career in the force at the DC police department. At the time, uniformed officers were required to work in narcotics to gain a better understanding of the drug crisis plaguing the city, and because nobody else in his section wanted to go, the responsibility fell on Dale. With that, in 1988, he went to vice for the 30-day detail. "Working in vice is like working in sales," Dale explains. "You have to build your own cases. It's all on you. I like working all the time, so it was a good fit."

In 1993, Dale served as a uniform sergeant for six months before switching back to a plain clothes unit, where he felt he truly belonged. Working undercover and leading squads to take down gangs, stop the illegal sale of firearms, and bust drug rings, he felt truly in his element. He also served in homicide for a short time. And while many around him struggled internally with the things they saw, Dale's faith gave him a framework through which he could quickly make sense of the troubling dynamics he encountered on the job. "We saw sin at the extreme—prostitutes, drugs, people ruining their lives," he remembers.

"I felt like I understood it, and that helped."

One particularly harrowing experience came when he was undercover doing deals with a gang of men who had committed a string of homicides, including around five of their own friends. Dale began buying from the gang with the help of an informant, and they happened to be running late one night in meeting up for an exchange. When the informant got out of the car to go talk to the gang members, he was shot and killed—a fate that could have befallen Dale if the timing had worked out differently. "I had spoken a lot about the Lord with that informant," Dale recalls now. "I hope it was enough."

Other standout performances during his time on the police force came when Dale worked as an undercover officer dealing with La Familia Mexicana drug cartel, and again with a commercial robbery group. Both investigations broke around the same time, prompting Dale's Chief of Police to nominate him for the Congressional Medal of Valor. "Growing up, I was afraid of a lot of things," he says. "If anything, I was probably more fearful than I needed to be. So I credit my relationship with God for these accomplishments. Only God could have changed me that much."

While working full-time as an officer in the evenings, Dale accepted a second full-time commitment during the day as the Director of Student Ministries at McLean Bible Church in 2001. Over the years, when they were between youth pastors, Dale would fill the void, working with junior high and high school kids. He also worked to build a strong, positive relationship between the Police Department and the surrounding community. Before long, Dale was asked to serve as the Outreach Director for the church, a job that required his resignation from the police force. "I loved being a cop and could have made a life of it, but I decided to leave the force in August of 2013," he says. "The following six months were hard, but the Lord ultimately knew best, and it ended up being the right decision."

Dale's leadership within the McLean Bible community was notable, but he never imagined he'd be named Associate Senior Pastor in 2014. "There's no way to think of this, other than that this was God's hand, because I don't believe I would have been the logical choice," he says. "I knew the Senior Pastor, Lon Solomon, but not well. We began discussing the state of McLean Bible, and I had a lot of ideas. I wanted to pray

more, give more to missionaries, work harder to make sure we were taking care of our people, and lead through love of the people and the world around us. I wanted to reduce the bureaucracy so we could serve more souls better. Lon was moved by my vision, and the Church's leadership decided they wanted to bring fresh eyes to the position to help ensure we were serving God's will. Our size didn't matter, and neither did our awards and recognition. What matters is having someone who asks God what He wants of us, and then strives day in and day out to pursue that. Lon knew I would throw my whole heart into that mission."

Now, as Senior Pastor, Dale draws his leadership philosophy directly from the Scriptures, with a focus on the Apostles and the Lord Jesus. He finished his degree in Biblical Studies through Trinity College of the Bible, with plans of completing a Masters as well. As well, his wife Patricia walks closely with God, and has been an important influence on his spiritual life. "She's always inspired me to stay with the Word and spend time with the Lord, even during the busiest of times," Dale says. "We have three wonderful daughters together, and she's always been incredibly supportive of the work I've wanted to do." Thanks in part to her support, Dale orients his leadership style around love of others. "My role is to take the fruits of the spirit which are still to be evidenced in a Christian's life, and constantly ask myself if I'm applying them," he explains. "A Biblical understanding of leadership guides my work with everyone around me."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Dale sings the praises of immersing oneself in the Bible's teachings. Growing up, he thought the Bible was tiresome, almost like a math book. But when he became a Christian himself, its meaning transformed dramatically, and continues to change his life each day since. "At some point, it was like a light went on, and it started to make sense," he recalls. "It's the key to all aspects of life, both personal and professional. Through hard times, it's the one thing I need, and in good times, it's a practical guide to living well. Immerse yourself in the Scriptures, and you'll get the direction you need in life. You'll hear the message, and you'll know the Truth."

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*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent*

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