

Ivan Q. Spencer: Commissioned for Revival *by Edie Mourey*

Ivan Quay Spencer was born November 28, 1888, to homesteaders in the Allegheny foothills of northern Pennsylvania. The second son of Merritt and Alice Spencer seemed destined to farm the family's 160 acres. But stories of early days of Methodism told to the small congregation in the West Franklin Methodist Church gripped young Ivan with a desperate hunger to know and experience God for himself. As he later said, "The calling of God is not necessarily to be a minister or a missionary, but the call of God for you is unto God Himself."

In response to that call, Ivan left the farm in 1909 to attend Wyoming Seminary in Pennsylvania. His leaving, however, was not the result of any encouragement given him by his father.

"What a stupid idea!" his father had bellowed when Ivan told him his intention. "Everyone knows you're a farmer – and a good one, too. Surely the Almighty wouldn't make such a mistake. If you must go to school to prove you're unsuited, go. But not one cent of my money will pay for it!"

That had ended their discussion. But Ivan's pastor suggested he could pay for his books and room and board by selling books to other students at seminary. With his means of self-support secured, he boarded the train in obedience to the call.

Sadly, after just one semester he had to return home. He was very ill with typhoid fever and the school was concerned about him causing an outbreak. Dispirited and sick on the train ride home, he heard God say, "Don't be discouraged, son. I will heal you if you'll trust Me." Ivan affirmed his trust in God, went to sleep, and awoke well. From that moment on, he believed in divine healing, preached it, and saw evidence of it in his ministry.

With his faith-inspiring experience, Ivan did not return to the farm defeated. He was sure of the call and knew somehow, somehow, God would prepare him for ministry. In the meantime, he began to tell others of his healing and its availability to them, too. No one in his church or community believed him. The pastor who commended him to seminary said, upon hearing Ivan's testimony, "If I were you...I'd not talk about this to others. You might be misunderstood and be called a fanatic. This could hurt your ministry later on."

Ivan's pastor wasn't the only one who could have tempered the young man's zeal to preach the message of divine healing. His very own mother didn't seem to believe him. This was a great disappointment to him at the time, but he was undeterred.

Life on the farm went on as usual until the day Ivan and his brother, Vern, were forced to go live with their Uncle Elwin Spencer in Elmira, New York. Apparently, a farmer noticed Vern and Ivan coming out of the woods and accused them of hunting out of season. Ivan's father had no choice but to make them move so as to avoid paying any impending fines.

Having both been put to work at a machine shop in Elmira, it became increasingly apparent to Uncle Elwin, however, that Ivan was dissatisfied with his employment. He thought the young man missed being on the farm and working in the soil. He understood that and sympathetically talked to him about the possibility of his finding him employment on a farm somewhere. Ivan was thankful, but told Uncle Elwin, "Of course I'd only want to go for a short while. I've got to preach, you know. But this

machine shop just isn't getting me any closer to preaching, and I was farming when God spoke to me before. I just feel like maybe that's where I should be until the way opens up for preaching."

Not soon after, Uncle Elwin secured Ivan work on a farm in Macedon, New York. It was there the young man would hear about Rochester Bible Training School (RBTS) in Rochester, New York, the place that would equip him for ministry.

Marion Meloon described this occasion in *Ivan Spencer: Willow in the Wind – A Spiritual Pilgrimage*. According to her, the farming family and its new hire had finished eating when Ivan began to share his testimony. The farmer's wife seemed to relate to Ivan's experience. She interrupted him at one point to tell of how she had been healed after suffering a serious illness.

"How did it happen? Did God speak to you? Have you told others? What did they think? Do you know anyone else who believes this way?" Ivan couldn't stop asking her questions. She was the first person not only to believe his story, but also to have experienced the healing power of God herself!

It was her answer to the last question – "Do you know anyone else who believes this way?" – that revealed the place where she had been prayed for and received her healing, Elim Tabernacle of Rochester, New York.

Ivan shared his call to preach. The farmer advised, "I'd say if you're called to preach, you shouldn't be trying to farm. Isn't there a seminary you can attend where you can get your training? How about the Genesee Wesleyan Seminary in Lima, only about 15 miles from here?"

"There's a Bible training school connected with the Elim Tabernacle," interrupted the farmer's wife, "that trains ministers and missionaries. It's small, and only a two-year course, but perhaps that is where you should go. Why don't you come to church with us Sunday and see about it?"

The wife's interjection won out. Ivan's curiosity and enthusiasm had been piqued. He had to visit Elim Tabernacle and did so the following Sunday.

Ivan Q. Spencer found his spiritual home at Elim. It was there he first heard divine healing preached and demonstrated again and again. But that wasn't the only "new thing" he saw and heard. He began to witness the wind of the Spirit moving among the people in the church meetings. And so, in the fall of 1911, Ivan enrolled at RBTS, the school associated with the Elim Tabernacle.

The Rochester Elim work was comprised of several ministries in those days. They had opened the Elim Faith Home and the Elim Mission in the late 1890's. At the turn of the century, they began Elim Publishing House, where they printed the *Trust* monthly journal for those of like Pentecostal faith. And, of course, there was RBTS and the church, Elim Tabernacle.

This "powerhouse of the east," as it became known, was an important center of early Pentecostalism. There, several early leaders of the Pentecostal movement received their training. Its populace had received the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the summer of 1907 – just on the heels of Azusa Street.

Upon enrollment, Ivan had yet to receive the precious baptism, though he had heard it spoken of often. Nonetheless, on one occasion the words of Elizabeth Sisson, famed Bible teacher and Elim guest speaker, convicted his heart. Exhorting her listeners, she said, "To those seeking the baptism, our

attitude is now, not of waiting and praying and seeking God, but rather that of 'receiving'; as He breathes out, we can breathe in, and thus may be filled."

Ivan and many others responded to her words at the altar that night. Desperation set in his soul, and from deep within came forth faith for the baptism of the Holy Ghost and fire. He received his personal Pentecost there at the altar – praising God, speaking in a heavenly language, and laughing in the Spirit. His was a full immersion.

Ivan not only received the baptism of the Holy Spirit while at RBTS in 1912, he also received a vision that would chart his future course and rekindle a passion he had felt at the Methodist church of his childhood.

In the vision, Ivan saw Spirit-filled people scattered throughout the world. The purpose for "this world-wide diffusion" as he called it, was for these to "intercede for greater things for the peoples of their respective localities."

Furthermore, he saw this movement grow in number, but not in power, resulting in a time of sifting and testing that ultimately led to a glorious outpouring. He said he literally saw large, flaming red letters spelling, "REVIVAL." In that moment, he knew he had been commissioned to revival ministry.

Ivan wouldn't have to complete his mission alone. Minnie Back, a young English woman who had become a faithful face at Elim Tabernacle, soon stole his gaze. The two fell in love and were married in 1913. They began ministry together, conducting evangelistic meetings as Ivan continued to farm for their livelihood. Throughout the ensuing years, they evangelized, pastored, and farmed in New York communities like Elmira, Hornell, Reading Center, and Endicott.

In December 1924, while traveling through a blinding snowstorm in order to keep an appointment near Endicott, the Lord spoke to Ivan about opening a Bible school. He heard the Lord instruct him to start a school that trained young men and women for the supernatural ministry of the last hour.

RBTS had continued after the death of its predominant leader, Mrs. E.V. Baker, in 1915. But in 1924 her sisters, who had continued carrying on the work, closed the school. With RBTS closed and this new direction, Elim Bible Institute was birthed in the summer of 1924 in Endwell, New York. As graduates left Elim and pursued national and international missions, a missionary and ministerial society was formed in 1932 to commission and credential them. Elim Fellowship, as it is known today, thus was born.

These were only the beginnings of Ivan Spencer – short clips of the entire movie of his life. Perhaps men and women like him are best remembered for their passion, the "one thing" they desired. And that for this man was revival.

The passion inflaming his life, ministry, and work had been ignited back at West Franklin Methodist Church. There his pastor preached on the second chapter of Acts. There Ivan, his attention and heart wrapped in awe and wonder at the pastor's verbal portrait, dared to believe, even as a boy, the vivid pictures of tongue-like fire appearing over those gathered together in the Upper Room. There his hopes for the future experience were deflated as the same man who had so moved him said, 'Of

course, such things do not happen today. The early Church needed signs and wonders to prove the reality of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and to get the Church underway.”

But it was too late. Something happened that day to a young boy. Though disheartened, the word pictures had produced something called faith. And that faith, as Ivan would later teach and preach, was a Person; it was Jesus Christ Himself!

Besides, the pastor continued the sermon, and his very next words undermined his own assertion that “such things do not happen today.” As he spoke about the early days of Methodism and a certain circuit-riding preacher who held meetings where people acted like those portrayed in Acts on the Day of Pentecost, Ivan began to see the possibility of these things happening in his day.

And that was it. The flame was lit in this youth and set afire in his young adulthood. The large, flaming red letters of REVIVAL consumed his vision, his message, and his life.

Ivan learned that revival made an impact on the Body of Christ personally and corporately. He once said, “Every fresh revival makes Jesus more real, the shedding of His blood more precious and the victories of the Cross more outstanding.” So he continued to preach the crucified life, the victorious overcoming life, and the revived life – all made possible only through the cross of Jesus Christ.

One of the added blessings of revival that Ivan sought was the unity of the fellowship of believers. His desire during times of visitation and outpouring was for the Body to be one. An editorial he wrote for *The Elim Pentecostal Herald* was titled, “Unity Paramount.” And he believed it. As he asserted, “On the Day of Pentecost, we find men of clashing nationalities, ingrained prejudices and diverse temperaments brought together in a deep heart unity, not unity in externals, but a unity of heart and mind.” He yearned for the day that brothers and sisters in Christ would come into the unity of the faith.

So it was only natural that he participated in various moves of God in the earth and that he fellowshipped with other believers in associations and conferences. Ivan attended the constitutional convention of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in May of 1943. He also served on the Board of Administration for the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America from its inception in 1948. He continued to look to the horizon for the flaming revival he saw that day in 1912 and was faithful to prepare the ensuing generations for it until his death on August 17, 1970.

Today, Elim Fellowship continues to thrive as a Christ-centered worldwide revival fellowship. It is a fruitful branch of the Church universal, cherishing brotherly and sisterly love toward all followers of Christ everywhere and, in addition, seeks to strengthen the Church to reach the world.

Published in ‘Servants of the Spirit: Portraits of Pentecostal/Charismatic Pioneers’ – Used with Permission