

The Story of Shadow Rock Church

1997-2006 Craig and Tricia Cunningham were living in Springfield, Missouri with their three young children; Lexi, Cameron, and Carter. Craig was the Connections Pastor at Central Assembly of God in Springfield, Missouri, which was a 100 year old large church of approximately 3,000 people.

June 2005 One evening, Craig and Tricia invited two-couples from Central Assembly to go boating on Table Rock Lake. They enjoyed the evening with their new friends, Paul and Rhonda Martinez and Bruce and Christy Durkee. At one moment, during sunset, while the boat was stopped on the lake, Paul said, "Can I ask you guys to pray about something? Would you all be willing to pray over the next 30 days about the possibility of all of us doing a church plant together somewhere in the country?" The couples talked about the fact that Springfield had an abundance of churches, and that there were so many communities around the country that, in contrast, had almost no churches. The idea of planting a church that could truly make an impact in a relatively unchurched community was exciting to think about, and they all agreed to pray about it.

One month later, the three couples reunited to discuss what the Lord was telling them. Bruce and Christy said, "In the last 30 days, we have decided to move back to La Quinta, CA, where we grew up." Bruce, a lawyer for the Assemblies of God at the time, said, "I have decided to start a private law practice in the desert, and if you'd all like to come, too, maybe we could do a church plant out there together." Paul and Rhonda and Craig and Tricia all agreed that the idea was exciting to think about, but practically giving up their jobs to move somewhere with no incomes seemed overwhelming. Bruce and Christy moved away, and Craig and Tricia and Paul and Rhonda went on with their lives in Missouri.

Feb. 2007 Craig and Tricia went out to dinner for Valentine's day. While at dinner, Craig commented on how great life was. Their children were thriving, and they had recently moved to a new home that they loved. Craig was the Connections Pastor at the church, overseeing many areas of responsibility, and Tricia was an Executive Director and therapist at the National Institute of Marriage in Branson, MO. They were reflecting on how meaningful their life together was. Tricia then posed a question to Craig. She said, "If money wasn't an obstacle, and you could do absolutely anything else at this point, is there any other life ambition or dream you'd still want to do?" Craig said, "I keep thinking about that conversation we had on the boat last year... about doing a church plant. I keep thinking about how cool it would be to plant a church in a community where there aren't many churches. I just love the idea of starting a church that could truly make a difference in an unchurched community. Tricia said, "We haven't talked to Bruce and Christy since they moved away. Let's call them and see if they're still interested in that idea." Right then, at the restaurant, they called Bruce and Christy and made plans to visit them in La Quinta a couple weeks later.

During their visit in the desert, they talked again about the thought of doing a church plant together. The Durkees suggested that they all visit the only big church in town at that time (Southwest church). While in that Saturday night service, the speaker said, "In a four-mile radius of this church, there are 40,000 people. Only about 4,000 of those people attend church anywhere. That means 90% of the population right around our church aren't going to church ANYWHERE. The need here is great." Craig and Tricia drove back to Springfield with a sense that the Lord was, in fact, calling them to the desert. But the financial piece of it felt daunting. They knew they couldn't just pick up and move without a plan, so they committed to keep praying that if God was in it, that He would make a way.

Mid-2007 Bruce and Christy called Craig and Tricia. Christy said, “We want to run something by you. My dad planted a small church back in the 80s in a location called Thousand Palms. It’s only about a 20-minute drive from La Quinta. It’s in a remote area “out in the middle of the desert.” My brother has been pastoring that church for the past three years, but he has had a recent health crisis, and needs to resign. We were wondering what you’d think about coming out here to pastor that church, and eventually, down the road, we could plant another church in La Quinta? It seemed like **confirmation** that God was orchestrating a way to make the vision of a church plant in La Quinta come to fruition.

2008 The Cunninghams drove out to Thousand Palms and Craig preached to the congregation of about 50 people. He was unanimously voted in as the new pastor of Desert Multichurch. They renamed it “Shadow Mountain Church” and dreamed of eventually planting four new churches out of that church, in various communities in the desert. They discussed that the first one would be a La Quinta church plant, and it would be called “Shadow Rock Church.” The name comes from Isaiah 32:2, “A man will be as a hiding place from the wind... rivers of water in a dry place, as the *shadow* of a great *rock* in a weary land.”

June 2008 The Cunninghams moved to a rental home in La Quinta, and began pastoring Shadow Mountain Church in Thousand Palms.

2008-2010 Much effort was put into the Thousand Palms church. However, growth wasn’t happening at the level they had hoped, and they believed that the remote location was the greatest obstacle. The Cunninghams and Durkees sensed that it was time to begin the La Quinta church, and asked the Thousand Palms congregation if they’d be willing to help launch it by volunteering their time to help serve at a new location. The congregation enthusiastically agreed, and a search began for rental space in La Quinta. The DSUSD school district building on Dune Palms Rd. had a large conference room that wasn’t being used on Sundays, so a meeting was scheduled with the school district officials to ask if they’d be open to renting that room for a La Quinta church launch.

Early in the morning on the day of that meeting, Tricia had a dream where she saw a large, nice new church building with streams of young families with children walking into it. Everything about the vision looked so unfamiliar and different from the demographic and location she had grown accustomed to in Thousand Palms, since the Thousand Palms community was a retirement community and there were very few young families there. (She would later recognize the building on Commerce Ct. as the building in that dream). As she was coming out of the dream, Tricia heard the Lord say, “Cast your net on the other side of the boat.” She shared this dream with Craig, Bruce, and Christy; and they all concluded that it was, in fact, time to cast “the net” into La Quinta. Later that day, the school district officials agreed to rent a large room in the school administrative building for the launch of the new La Quinta campus.

Feb. of 2010 The La Quinta campus was named “Shadow Rock Church.” For two years, Pastor Craig preached at both churches. He’d preach at Shadow Mountain Church in Thousand Palms for the first service, then drive 25 minutes across town to La Quinta to preach at Shadow Rock Church for the second service. When the schedule began to feel unsustainable, a campus pastor named Ed Tyler was placed at the Thousand Palms campus. For a couple more years, Shadow Rock and Shadow Mountain continued as one church with two locations. Church members from both campuses devoted countless volunteer hours in an effort to help the church grow. There was a lot of excitement as the La Quinta campus began to grow.

The Thousand Palms campus, however, struggled numerically, and the conclusion was that it was primarily due to its remote location. There came a day where the church membership voted to sell the Thousand Palms campus and to focus solely on La Quinta. They made the decision to set aside the proceeds from the sale of the Thousand Palms building (\$599,000) to one day be used as a downpayment on a future permanent La Quinta building.

The room Shadow Rock rented at the school district was only supposed to be a short-term arrangement. After four years, SRC was asked to begin looking for a permanent building. Between high costs and zoning laws forbidding churches from meeting in most commercial zones in town, owning their own building seemed impossible, and rental options were limited. Eventually, a furniture store became available for rent on Hwy 111 in La Quinta.

June 2014 SRC began meeting in their new rental space on Hwy 111. They loved having a place where they could do ministry day in and day out. They also loved not having to set up and tear down chairs and equipment every week, like they had done at the school district building for four years. They felt like they finally had a church home. But it was small, which limited growth potential, and the rent continued increasing year after year. Despite that, the church continued to thrive. They met there for 5 years.

2017 SRC had a vacancy for a worship pastor. The McKee family, whom the Cunninghams had known in Springfield, MO, had just moved to the Los Angeles area. Craig and Tricia remembered how musically talented they were, and Craig went to visit them to ask if they'd be willing to commute to Shadow Rock on Sundays for a while to lead worship. Initially, the thinking was that it would be a short-term arrangement, since Jen and Ryan had other career plans. But, after several months of commuting to the desert on Sundays, the McKees decided to make the desert their permanent home, and officially joined the staff. Initially, Ryan led worship; but at some point, he and Jen switched roles, and she has been the worship pastor ever since.

During various seasons over the years, some of the Cunningham, Durkee, and McKee grown children also served in staff roles. Aidan Miller and Hannah (Durkee) were youth pastors, Cassie Richmond (Durkee) was Children's pastor, Cameron Cunningham was Creative pastor and youth pastor, Carter Cunningham was an interim youth pastor, and now Jackson McKee is the creative director.

May 2019 Tricia saw online that a gym was for sale in La Quinta, just a mile away from the SRC rental building. It seemed perfect. It was approximately 16,000 sq. ft., and was listed for 1.8 million dollars. She showed it to the board, and they concluded that with funds that had been set aside from the sale of the Thousand Palms campus, the mortgage payments on the new building (if they got it) would be about half of what they were already paying for the rental space. It seemed too good to be true. However, the biggest obstacle was that it was in a zone that was restricted for church gatherings. Bruce, being an attorney, believed the restriction was unconstitutional, and committed to fight the zoning restrictions on behalf of the church. The board decided to submit an offer on the building, with the contingency that they could get the zoning restriction reversed. After receiving the offer, the landlord called back and said, "Another party has also submitted an offer. I'm going to ask both of you to submit your highest and best offer."

June 2019 Just a few days after the realtor asked SRC to put in their highest and best offer on the building, Pastor Craig, age 50, was given a tragic diagnosis of stage 4 colon cancer. The doctor told him he may only have 3 to 6 months to live. He, and his entire family, were

devastated. Pastor Craig shared the news with the board and asked what they wanted to do with the offer on the building, in light of his diagnosis. There was consensus among the board to trust God with the process of moving forward with the offer. They submitted an offer of 2.05 million, and in a big step of faith, they removed the loan and zoning contingencies.

The next day, after submitting the offer, Craig, Tricia, Bruce, and Christy were sitting in the waiting room at Craig's first oncology appointment. While in the waiting room, Bruce received a text from the seller's realtor. Bruce looked at Craig and said, "The offer has been accepted. We're now in escrow." The heaviness in that oncology waiting room turned to hope and excitement. Minutes later, Craig and Tricia went in to meet with the doctor to hear what could be expected of the impending prognosis. That day felt like the best of times coupled with the worst of times. Pastor Craig knew God had the power to heal him completely, but he also surrendered himself to God's will. He was committed to continuing to pastor the church for as long as God gave him the strength to do so.

To Craig, having Shadow Rock own its own building represented the assurance that ministry would continue, even in his absence. Long before cancer, Craig would say regularly, "Shadow Rock is built on Jesus, not on me. The church needs to be structured in such a way that if I ever get hit by a bus, the church can continue without me." After he got cancer, he changed the saying slightly, and would say, "If I get hit by the cancer bus, it's important to make sure we have everything in place so Shadow Rock can continue with or without me." He thought about Shadow Rock, and its potential impact, continually.

Miraculously, Bruce was able to get the zoning restrictions dropped, and the building renovations began. Then COVID hit, and everything shut down.

Shadow Rock went through Covid and Craig's cancer at the same time. Craig continued to preach from home (or the hospital, at times) for over a year. Jen and the worship team recorded songs from home, and Cameron would edit everything and upload church online throughout the government shutdown. At some point, when some of the Covid restrictions were lifted, SRC began to meet in the parking lot of the new building. This allowed time for the renovations of the building to be completed.

When Pastor Craig was first diagnosed with cancer, and was given just months to live, the thought of getting to preach in the new building felt like a longshot dream.

April 2021 Easter Sunday, Shadow Rock had their first service inside the new building. Though Pastor Craig had endured over sixty rounds of chemotherapy and several surgeries, his longshot dream of getting to preach in the new building had come true. And, then, God gave him another two years of getting to pastor Shadow Rock Church in the new building.

May 2023 Craig had a quick decline in health, and ended up going to the hospital. When Craig realized that he wouldn't be home by Sunday, he called his brother-in-law, David Nicholson, who was a pastor, and asked if he would be willing to preach at SRC that Sunday. David had planted a church in Utah, and his family had been there for years. But, David and his wife were about to become empty nesters, and since their church had closed during the Covid pandemic, and hadn't reopened, he was in a season of trying to discern what God was wanting him to do next. David flew out from Utah to preach at SRC that Sunday, while Craig and Tricia were at City of Hope cancer hospital. While there, it became clear that Craig's time on earth was coming to an end. Craig and Tricia were watching the SRC service online from the hospital room, and after hearing David preach, they looked at one another and said, "I think he's

the one.” They both sensed that David would be the next pastor at Shadow Rock. But, the decision needed to be voted on by the church members.

June 4th 2023 Two weeks after preaching in what appeared to be a completely normal state of health, Craig was pushed to the stage in a wheelchair, where he gave his final message to the SRC congregation. He explained that the doctors had been given less than 30 days to live, and that Pastor David would be filling in for him. After Craig’s message, one person after another went up to the microphone and shared how much Craig had impacted their lives in the time they’d known him. On the way home from church, Craig said, “That was so meaningful. I feel like I just got to attend my own funeral.”

June 5th 2023 In the middle of the night, while in bed, Pastor Craig looked at Tricia and said with certainty, “It’s my time. I know Jesus wouldn’t lie to me. I’m going to Paradise.” Tricia said, “Wait. The kids are all here. Let me go get them.” She ran into the bedrooms and woke up the children (and their spouses). As they all surrounded his bed, Craig spoke to each one, telling them each how much he loved them, and that he’d see them in heaven. As soon as he was done speaking, he said, “Help me sit up.” As they helped him sit up in bed, Craig’s heart suddenly stopped beating, and his family witnessed him take his last breath. As they saw his body relax, they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was in heaven, embraced by the loving arms of Jesus.

Craig had been an incredible husband and father. He loved his family, his friends, and Shadow Rock Church deeply. But as deep as that love was, everyone who knew him knew that his greatest love was for Jesus. Knowing that he was in heaven with Jesus, gave his family and the SRC church family comfort and peace in the midst of their deep sorrow.

Shadow Rock’s mission is ***to flood heaven with people whose lives have been transformed by the power of God.*** We like to think that Pastor Craig is now in heaven’s welcoming committee for all those whose lives have been touched by Shadow Rock Church.

Pastor David and his wife, Melissa, helped Shadow Rock through the first year of heartache and transition as the church, and Pastor Craig’s family grieved.

February 2024 Pastor David was unanimously voted in as the lead pastor.

Today, Shadow Rock Church is flourishing under Pastor David and Melissa Nicholson.

December 2024 Two very large donations came in that, together, paid off the entire mortgage of the new building. One was from a woman who passed away, and had left a large donation to SRC in her estate. She had visited SRC with her dear friend who had attended SRC faithfully for years. Because of that woman’s friendship with her neighbor, and her positive experience at SRC, she ended up leaving 1/3 of her estate to Shadow Rock. The second donor has been a supporter of SRC for many years, and in an act of overwhelming generosity, gave a stock donation that completed the payoff of the church mortgage. What a Christmas gift that was!

Even as this story is being written, God is orchestrating new endeavors for Shadow Rock Church to be able to have an even broader impact.

Over the years, we have known of so many people at SRC whose lives have been transformed by the power of God. We hear the stories of addictions being broken, hearts being mended, and

people being set free.

Church members and staff have come and gone, as well. But SRC continues to thrive as the dedicated staff and amazing volunteers continue to devote their time, talent, and treasure week after week to help make SRC a truly loving and welcoming place, where real people can find authentic faith.

If you aren't already part of the SRC family, you, too, can play a part in our story. We invite you to join us.

The best is yet to come...