

Praise for
The Most Loving Place in Town

"This is a great story. Jesus placed all His bets on the mastering of love by His people. Read it—and get to work!"

—John Ortberg

Pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church; and Author,
When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box

"Only authors who love a church could have written such a beautiful parable. I was convicted as I identified with the characters. I was tremendously blessed as I saw God's plan for all churches. My eyes watered a few times, and my heart was filled with joy as I saw the church revived through sharing the love of Christ."

—Charles "Tremendous" Jones

Publisher, Executive Books

"In *The Most Loving Place in Town*, Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges have showed us how *love* can, and must, transform us and the church. This is a must-read. But more importantly, it is a must *do* for every Christian and every church if we are truly to be followers of Jesus."

—Marjorie Dorr

Former Chief Strategy Officer, WellPoint

"With all the busyness and stress in our world today, this simple yet profoundly powerful story is a beacon of hope not only for church life but also for all of our lives. It's a call to remember that *God is love*, and we're called by Him to model that in every way that we live our lives, especially in His church. With leadership founded on Biblical *love*—not judgment, self-interest, or a plethora of programs—churches can begin to draw people back into the fold. This heartfelt book is the godly how-to handbook to do just that!"

—Barbara A. Glanz

Speaker and Author, *The Simple Truths of Service*, *The Simple Truths of Appreciation*, and *What Can I Do? Ideas to Help Those Who Have Experienced Loss*

"This is a must-read for everyone who claims to be a Christian. The book furnishes thought-provoking study questions that all church board members should use as a guide to examine themselves and the churches they are leading. Thank you, Ken and Phil, for reminding us of God's charge for our lives and the power of prayer."

—Roger Roberson

Chairman, Roberson Management

"We all know a thousand ways that the local church can fail. This book shows one way—the essential way—for the local church to succeed in carrying out its mission: become the most loving place in town. This book does for the local church what *Lead Like Jesus* does for the individual leader: it shows a way to make Jesus smile!"

—Greg Bunch

President, Masterplan International Corporation

"Ken and Phil have done it again! They keep hitting the center cut of the target! You'll want to pick up this new book and will not be able to put it down. God has truly blessed them with incredible gifts. You'll be blessed!

—Jim Blanchard

Retired Chairman and CEO, Synovus Financial Corp.

"*The Most Loving Place in Town* touches the very sorest place in the human heart: our deep longing for a community of true kindness and grace. Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges have written a moving and biblically sure-footed parable that will guide you and your congregation back to 'your first love.' Read this book, shed tears of repentance and joy, and make yourself available to the work God wants to do to renew love and caring in your local church."

—Ken Jennings and John Stahl-Wert

Best-Selling Authors, *The Serving Leader* and
Ten Thousand Horses

"*The Most Loving Place* reminds us that even though the busyness of Christ-centered communities is necessary, it is not primary. The business of those vibrant, living communities is *love*. We are reminded that choosing any action or activity over a loving relationship is a bad decision. With great insights and anecdotes, the authors remind us of three important truths: The best use of life is *love*. The best expression of love is *time*. And the best time to love is *now*."

—Mick Ukleja, PhD

President, Leadership Traq; and Best-Selling Author,
Who Are You and What Do You Want?

"It takes a couple of real servants to write a book about servant leadership and its number one ingredient: love. Ken and Phil do a great job of modeling the leadership style of Jesus. This book is a keeper on how it is done."

—C. Kemmons Wilson Jr.
Founding Family—Holiday Inns

"All of us earnestly desire to be in a loving church. However, many churches are not the most loving places in town. In this parable, Ken and Phil have shown us how to start the journey under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to transform our own church into the most loving place in town."

—Micky Blackwell
Former President and COO, Lockheed Martin
Aeronautical Systems

"This book takes us back to basics: love God, and love one another. The parable brings to life the simple yet profound truths that Jesus taught through His deeds and words. Churches that embrace the message of this book can become the most loving places in town."

—Bobby Ukrop
President and CEO, Ukrop's Super Markets, Inc.

"In the engaging narrative style that has become a hallmark of Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *The Most Loving Place in Town* is the perfect remedy for anyone in any environment—whether church, business, or home—who has developed 'spiritual cataracts.' This book should find its way into the hands of every churchgoer in the nation—better yet, in the world!"

—Paul J. Meyer
Founder, Success Motivation International, Inc.,
and *New York Times* Best-Selling Author

**THE MOST LOVING
PLACE IN TOWN**

THE MOST LOVING PLACE IN TOWN

A MODERN-DAY PARABLE FOR THE CHURCH

Ken Blanchard & Phil Hodges



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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“By this all men will know that you are my disciples,
if you love one another.”

— JOHN 13:35

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Chapter 1

THE LETTER

"Thank the Lord for term limits," Tim Manning muttered to himself as he looked down at the agenda from last night's meeting of the Beacon Hill Community Church Elder Council. Three months from finishing his third consecutive two-year term as church chairman, Tim was ineligible to serve a fourth term. Although ambivalent about leaving office, he had to admit that it was good that he go. He still cared passionately about the church and was gratified by many things that had happened during his term in office. But he was worn out. After eighty-two council meetings, twenty-three congregational business meetings, and countless daily phone calls, e-mails, and coffee-shop meetings, he was ready

to turn over leadership responsibilities to the next “suffering servant.”

Tim had no idea that his most important leadership journey with the church would begin in a matter of moments.

As Tim reviewed the agenda, he paused at the third item: “Beacon Hill 30th Anniversary Celebration—Planning Update.” It was a bit unusual to hold a thirtieth anniversary celebration. But his predecessor had abruptly shelved plans for a twenty-fifth anniversary celebration when the head pastor was fired for participating in local demonstrations against the war. The extreme tension that had permeated the church at that time precluded any attempts at joyful celebration.

In the aftermath, attendance had dropped. There was a significant loss of financial support when some long-term members left the church over the pastor’s firing. Budget talks became competitive, contentious, and sometimes downright nasty.

As the new incoming chairman, Tim, along with the rest of the leadership team, had spent a lot of time and effort to prevent an out-and-out split in the church. Emotions ran high. Walls went up between the opposing sides of the decision to fire the pastor. When the furor calmed down, cold politeness froze over an undercurrent of deep anger and hurt. It had been a time of testing that brought Tim to his knees, asking God for the patience and wisdom not to respond out of his own pride, fear, and frustration.

With the passage of time and the departure of some of the more bitter members of the congregation, the church slowly began to heal. The arrival of Mike Reston, a gifted young pastor with clear doctrine and an engaging preaching style, further buoyed up the spirits of the congregation. When an auto parts plant opened nearby, an influx of new people into the area gradually restored weekend attendance to former levels. Giving increased with the turnaround in the stock market, and the health of the balance sheet vastly improved.

Today Tim believed that the church was again strong. It was certainly buzzing with activity. Something was going on every night. Bible studies, support groups, commission meetings, and the annual surges of activity centered on the Christmas and Easter pageants left little time for idle hands. There had been such a positive change that Tim gladly had endorsed the idea to hold the Beacon Hill Community Church thirtieth anniversary celebration in the coming year.

As he thought about it, Tim could look back on a season of leadership when working hard, persevering, and keeping the gospel message alive and on track had borne fruit. He even secretly pictured himself receiving a "well done, good and faithful servant" for his efforts. He smiled and reviewed the rest of the agenda:

- ♥ Review of requests by three ministry commissions for improved funding in next year's budget

- ♥ Recommendations from the Finance and Property Commission on delaying the reroofing of the Christian education building
- ♥ Open discussion on how to better deal with the number of marriages in crisis
- ♥ Results of negotiations between the leaders of the New Horizon Senior Sunday School Class and student ministries on switching meeting rooms
- ♥ Plans for the National Day of Prayer

It contained the usual set of land mines but nothing Tim hadn't been able to handle. He had to admit that he had come down pretty hard on one of the younger elders who had suggested a delay in beginning the reroofing project. This was something Tim had his heart set on completing before his term of office was over. By the end of last night's meeting—after lots of active and sometimes heated conversations—all the issues had been resolved, and everyone had left in a good humor, more or less.

Just three more months of council meetings. Tim wondered what it would be like to have every other Tuesday night back. No more hurried suppers, over-the-speed-limit dashes to the church, and those wide-awake debriefings that delayed sleep and made Wednesday mornings at work a real challenge.

He noted that he would dearly miss the fellowship, devotional teaching, and prayer time that he shared with his fellow elders. Again, Tim smiled. He cared about these folks. As a group, including himself, they were not perfect. But God love them, they came together twice a month at the end of a hard day of working out in the world to do their best about God's business. They prayed together, laughed together, fought with each other, and by God's grace made their share of good, great, and not-so-great decisions together.

Still, Tim was looking forward to taking some time off with a sense of a job well done.

Feeling satisfied, Tim put aside the agenda and thumbed through the morning mail. His eyes went immediately to a handwritten envelope addressed to Tim Manning, BHCC Chairman. Usually items addressed to him in this manner contained one of two things—a complaint from a member of the congregation or, on rare occasions, a note of encouragement. He wondered what it would be this time.

The single sheet was written in a clear but unfamiliar hand. It read:

Dear Tim,

I have been observing you and your season of leadership at Beacon Hill for many years and thought it important to write to you at this time. I have watched your hard work in guiding Beacon Hill out of a period

of turmoil and challenge. You have endured a great deal and persevered with energy in creating a level of excitement and activity within the church. For all this I commend you and the other leaders who have worked with you.

Tim paused in his reading and thought, *Wow! I was just hoping to get a "well done, good and faithful servant," and here it is in this morning's mail.* He read on:

I'm writing to bring something important to your attention. You have lost your first love. You and Beacon Hill Community Church have drifted away from the love of God and one another as your first priority and into a pattern of success-driven busyness. If this serious situation is not turned around, it will destroy the church's credibility.

Fear not, Tim. All is not lost. I am writing to encourage you to lead a change that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can be accomplished. If you accept the challenge to restore love into the life of the church by reviving the passion and humility that were present when the church was first starting out, you and Beacon Hill will receive blessings beyond your imagination. The way back must start with you.

This letter is sent in love as always, with faith that what is required can be done.

Your Truest Friend

Tim stared at the letter in disbelief. His thoughts quickly turned to frustration. While the writer had sugarcoated the feedback, Tim was convinced it came from one of the chronic critics he had learned to endure during his terms in office.

He frowned. "For ax grinders like this person, nothing is ever right," he said out loud. Silently he continued to rationalize.

Beacon Hill is far from being out of control, and a lot is being accomplished to further the kingdom, he thought. The numbers have turned around in the church's giving and attendance. The people of this church share a common cause in doing things in the Lord's name. There's a new sense of urgency. Things are on the move again!

With that off his chest, Tim tossed the letter into the wastebasket and began sorting through the rest of the mail. He always prided himself on keeping up with his regular mail as well as his e-mail. He was about to write some notes on the yellow legal pad he always kept at his desk when the phone rang.

Feeling mildly annoyed at the interruption, he answered with an abrupt "hello."

"Mr. Manning?" It was a woman's voice, and something in her tone told Tim this was not going to be good news.