

Black, White Churches Unite in Alabama to Win a Divided City

In Birmingham, churches want to move beyond yesterday's civil rights violations by forging an era of reconciliation

On the north side of Birmingham, Ala., a rap group recently performed at a local park, grabbing the attention of hundreds of people who watched from a flatbed trailer loaded with loud speakers. The music echoed through the area, stirring excitement and a

curiosity and interrupting the everyday routines of the neighborhood, one of the city's poorest.

Later that day, the rappers were replaced by preachers—both of whom are part of Birmingham Harvest 2000, an evangelistic outreach that stems from several area churches—black and white—that have joined together to minister to Birmingham's inner city.

Mark Correll, pastor of The Cathedral of the Cross—one of Birmingham's largest churches—says his congregation has been a part of Harvest 2000 since it began. He calls it a “yearly quest to help those around Birmingham.”

“It inevitably helps all the churches involved as it deepens the commitments of regular churchgoers to the Lord's work, right here where they live,” Correll said.

This partnership crosses both racial and denominational lines

and is a sign that a much different Birmingham has emerged in recent years. Even as Harvest 2000 took place this year, former Ku Klux Klansmen Thomas Blanton Jr. and Bobby Frank Cherry sat in a Birmingham jail, both of them charged in connection with the 1963 bombing that killed four black girls in the city's 16th Street Baptist Church.

Their arrests—which occurred only recently—have renewed memories of Civil Rights-era cross burnings and deep-seated prejudice that many here would like to forget. That notorious history will come to life again this month when Blanton Jr. and Cherry stand trial.

Blacks and whites coming together in a gathering like Harvest 2000 would not have happened in the 1960s, when prejudice and racism ran high in Birmingham. But today's pastors are more hopeful and place a value on new relationships, saying the horrid past is being erased gradually with positive changes.

"Prejudice and bigotry die slowly," Correll said. "But the catalyst to its death are leaders in government, in pulpits, in local politics and churches who will take a stand and be willing to change history, not merely repeat it."

David Wooten is pastor of New Life Assembly of God in Westover, Ala., a mostly white suburb of Birmingham, and Arthur Johnson is pastor of Doers of the Word Ministries in the mostly black area of Birmingham's inner city called Avondale.

"Churches aren't going to come together until leaders come together," Wooten said.

Johnson agrees: "There is no superiority or inferiority at Calvary. There, we're brothers."