

Brownsville Assembly of God Moves Forward After Split

The revival that hit the church in 1995 has lulled, but pastor John Kilpatrick expects something 'new and powerful'

Brownsville Assembly of God continues to rebound from the many trials and fires it has passed through since an international revival was birthed at the Pensacola, Fla., church on Father's Day 1995.

Enduring their most painful test yet—the firing of Michael Brown as president of the Brownsville Revival School of Ministry (BRSM) in December 2000—pastor John Kilpatrick and BRSM leaders note there is an intense spiritual expectancy in the church, similar to what they experienced just before the revival began.

"We don't know exactly what God is going to do, but we sense that God is going to do something again," Kilpatrick told Charisma in November. "Even after 6-1/2 years, it's like God is going to do a new and powerful thing."

Revival services that ran four nights a week during evangelist Steve Hill's tenure have been reduced to one revival service on Friday nights. But the lull has seemed more like passing through the eye of a hurricane—with the most powerful portion of the storm coming after the quietest point, Brownsville staffers say.

Gone are the throngs of people who once waited in line all day to get into a service. But the powerful presence of God has never left, attendees say. Guest speakers such as Tommy

Tenney, Winkie Pratney and John Bevere minister on Friday nights.

One such service in November featured guest minister Claudio Freidzon, a key leader in the revival that swept Argentina during the 1990s. There were signs during his service that the same anointing and deep presence of God that saturated the revival's heyday still flows at Brownsville.

The entire sanctuary became the altar as Freidzon and his interpreters, as well as Kilpatrick and his pastoral staff, roamed row to row laying hands on and praying for everyone in their path. Aisles were filled with prostrate attendees—and scenes of the revival's peak period when evangelist Hill was still onboard leaped to mind.

The public baptism portion of the service—a well-known highlight during the revival—delivered many of the same testimonies of miraculous deliverance from drug addiction, alcohol or prostitution that are the hallmark of revival. Repentant sinners saved by grace were fired up to win the world with their testimonies.

The hands-on ministry time was preceded by more than an hour of worship led by Mike Motley. He was standing in for Lindell Cooley, who was ministering in California and is still the full-time worship leader at Brownsville.

Freidzon explained to Charisma why he believes God continues to base an outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Brownsville.

“There is an emphasis on holiness, which shows us that revival comes with a price,” he said. “If we can see that they

maintain revival, it is because they are paying a price.”

That sacrifice includes throwing out standard time-restraints on the services’ praise and worship to allow the congregation to move beyond “the barriers of religious spirits,” Freidzon said.

“God is allowed to have His way. I have spoken here many times, and I have witnessed this,” he added.

Also, Freidzon noted how Brownsville leaders focus on raising up servants to go into the world to obey the Great Commission. And church leaders “are not permissive about sin. When it comes to sin—they tell it like it is,” Freidzon said.

BRSM has restaffed its faculty after Brown took eight of then 10 instructors with him to start a new school, known as FIRE (Fellowship of International Revival and Evangelism), across town. The BRSM school now uses local ministers as adjunct instructors, said Richard Crisco, president of BRSM.

“This is a nice new flavor,” said Crisco, who also is pastor of student ministries at Brownsville. “We have more voices speaking into our students’ lives now.”

Ward Simpson, BRSM’s executive director, agreed. “We have more faculty now than we ever had,” he added. “We also expanded the curriculum. We offer four degrees now instead of just one.”

Simpson said the school did not miss a beat in the chaotic interim after Brown’s departure. At the time, there was just a month or so until classes were to begin in January 2001.

Simpson said God intervened and pulled the splintered staff back together. "It was [a] divine act of the Lord. He brought in the right people at the right time."

Evangelist Larry Martin of Joplin, Mo., is BRSM's dean of academics. Kilpatrick called on him to replace staff that left with Brown because Kilpatrick knew of Martin's experience as president of Messenger Bible College, a Pentecostal Church of God school in Joplin.

Academic credit earned at BRSM is now accepted at five colleges and universities. Students can earn associate degrees and move on to finish a bachelor's degree at other institutions or seek ministerial credentials with one of five placement organizations.

BRSM is not officially recognized as an Assemblies of God (AG) school, but about 30 percent of the students seek AG credentials. Students are free to seek licensing with any denomination and are not pressured to stay in the AG, Crisco said.

More than half of BRSM's 1,100 students chose to leave the school to attend FIRE. About 430 remain. Some 46 of those come from 26 countries. The rest come from every region of the United States. Their zeal is contagious.

Stephan Lorenz, 22, from Worpsswede, Germany, heard about BRSM when a couple who had graduated from the school came to his church for an internship. He first visited the revival in 1998 and said he felt called to attend BRSM.

"Germany is really dry—only 2 percent are Christian. Here, I

have come to know God in a deeper way. The revelation of His love for people has given me a burden to see people saved.”

Carl Meier, 21, from Albany, N.Y., is in his third semester at BRSM. “It’s been awesome. I have had the opportunity to travel to France and Switzerland on missions trips and led a trip to Germany in October,” Meier said. “The opportunities here never cease. They don’t just give you the theological learning. They give you practical hands-on ministering experience. The professors here are awesome.”

Kilpatrick expressed sorrow over the painful split that occurred when Brown was fired but said the decision was made in the best interests of the church and the school. Officially, Brown was fired because of what Kilpatrick said are irreconcilable differences on how the vision of the school was to be implemented.

“I have pastored for 31 years, 20 at Brownsville, and this is the first time in 31 years that we have ever endured this kind of division,” Kilpatrick said. “It is extremely painful—especially because we love all of these people [who left]. I think you suffer the depth of pain to the depth that you love someone.”

Kilpatrick said his studies of other historic revivals all produced evidence that the devil always tries to disrupt a move of God by causing division in leadership.

“The last thing a pastor of a major move of God wants is for some kind of schism or division to happen on his watch,” he said. “I did everything humanly possible to keep things from turning sour, from turning into something that would hurt the

school, the church or the body of Christ at large.”

Brown’s decision to open a school across town and also start a church to accompany the school has been a sore point in reconciliation attempts that so far have failed. But Kilpatrick said he’s optimistic that the hurts on both sides will be healed.

“I don’t think it’s healthy for internal church problems to be aired. I think it needs to be covered in the Blood [of Jesus], and leaders who fear God to deal with them in a discreet manner.” He hinted that independent mediators might work behind the scenes to help bring both sides together.

“The church is doing extremely well,” Kilpatrick said. “The Spirit is moving powerfully at Brownsville. Revival is not church as usual. It is an invasion of the Spirit of God. When He comes in, nothing is ever the same.”

-Billy Bruce in Pensacola, Fla.