

Chicago Pastor Seeks to Develop Minority Entrepreneurs

Bill Winston hopes his business school will help close the economic gap between minorities and the general population

If you ask pastor William S. Winston his age, expect to hear this: "My real birthday"—the day he became a Christian—"is Sept. 22, 1980." If you persist, he will say he's at least 50 years old.

There are other numbers, however, that Winston is more willing to reveal. When he moved his congregation from a downtown storefront to the Chicago suburb of Forest Park, Ill., between 12 and 15 people followed.

Now, 16 years later, Living Word Christian Center claims a membership of 14,000. The congregation paid \$4 million for the three-theater cineplex behind a mall to house their church, and today Winston estimates the renovated building is worth 10 times as much.

"I am an example that real wealth is not in dollars; it's in your own insight, your own ability to see opportunities and take advantage of them," Winston said.

That's the vision Winston hopes to cast into the students at his Joseph Center School of Business and Entrepreneurship, where his dream of training a workforce of Christian entrepreneurs is coming to life. More than 130 men and women have graduated from the nine-month business program based on biblical principles.

"If everybody develops their unique ability, that unique ability would make room for them in this universe of opportunities and bring them into substantial income," Winston said.

African-Americans make up roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population but only 3.5 percent of the leadership of firms, and they generate less than 3 percent of the income firms produce, said Eric Dobyne, regional director of the Minority Business Development Agency, a division of the Department of Commerce.

"If you look at that number and think about ... the amount [African-Americans] would be able to contribute to the overall economy if they were just at entrepreneurial parity—meaning the point at which the percentage of the population is equivalent to the percentage of firms—you're talking about a significant impact on the American economy," Dobyne said.

He said The Joseph Center could help shrink that gap. "In order for us to progress I think it's going to be important that we have partnerships between the public sector, being the government, the private sector, being corporations, and the faith-based organizations," he said. "So anytime I see an entrepreneurial center open, I think it's definitely a step in the right direction."

India native Rajan Oommen said The Joseph Center helped point him in the right direction. He grew up in an entrepreneurial family and ran his own deep sea fishing business but believed he needed more training. He considered getting an MBA, but when he saw The Joseph Center's graduation ceremony, he took it as a sign that he should attend.

Now, almost four years after graduating from The Joseph Center, Oommen has his own mortgage business and says he earns a six-figure income. "I need to make far more money than this," he said. "I have been told by God specifically to do things in [million-dollar] amounts, [such as helping to build Bible schools and churches]. The six-figure dollar amount will not ... suffice to do those things."

Born in Tuskegee, Ala., Winston says he grew up in a community of entrepreneurial-minded African-Americans. He joined the Air Force, then later got a job at IBM, working in sales on commission.

But Winston sensed a call to ministry. He attended Oral Roberts University for a year before moving to Chicago in 1988 and founding Living Word. He said one verse has driven him through the years: Isaiah 48:17, "'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go'" (NKJV).

"I was born for this part of His vision to be manifested on the earth," Winston said. "There's a reason Moses was born. There's a reason Abraham was born."

Shevelle L. Freeman, a 41-year-old psychologist, is currently enrolled at The Joseph Center. For five years, she has clung to a vision of opening Revelations Counseling Center in Detroit, Atlanta and her hometown of Chicago.

She was confident in her ability as a counselor but didn't believe she had the skills to run her own business. When she heard about The Joseph Center, she said she knew she needed to

“run for it.”

But becoming an entrepreneur isn't about making a lot of money, she said. “It's about kingdom business. All that I do is to the glory of God. For me, this is using my gifts, helping this world and lifting up God in the process.”

Abigail Reese in Chicago