

Church recovering after Clarence McClendon's departure

West Adams Foursquare is rebounding a year after the well-publicized marital breakup of Clarence McClendon

New Life Christian Center, formerly Church of the Harvest International and still officially West Adams Foursquare Church, located in Los Angeles, is rebounding after former pastor Clarence McClendon's public split from the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel last summer.

The new pastor, C. Lamont Leonard, 41, has been in the ministry for 24 years and is known as a pre-eminent worship figure and a leader in racial reconciliation. Under his ministry the church has grown to 325 people in Sunday attendance.

He follows a messy situation.

Clarence McClendon, once a young, rising star in the Foursquare denomination and pastor of the 10,000-member Church of the Harvest International, left the denomination after his wife, Tamera, divorced him saying he had pressured her to do so. One week later, Clarence remarried and soon began holding services in the Hollywood Palladium. He blamed the Foursquare leadership for shunning him despite his ministry's large following.

Left behind in the situation was the West Adams Foursquare Church, a historic body founded in 1939, which suddenly had no

pastor or a stable congregation. The denomination's leaders invited Leonard to help "restart" the church in mid-2000.

"I had to start with the mentality of having zero membership," Leonard said. "This was not taking over Church of the Harvest or West Adams. All I had was the building."

Leonard was raised in Los Angeles, where he studied vocal performance and intended to become an opera singer. Instead, he went into ministry and most recently pastored a church in San Jose, Calif., that merged with another church to promote racial integration.

Leonard still runs a ministry called Destiny Shapers, which helps churches become ethnically diverse, but Foursquare leaders persuaded him to give most of his time to restarting the church left by McClendon.

"I don't know why they asked me, but I know that God was speaking to my wife and me about restoration and healing, and that's what my ministry is about," he said. "Ironically, I had just told my wife and others that I would never move back to L.A. unless God moved me."

Leonard was swayed when he walked through the community and saw that it needed restoration on every level, from economic to relational. He also recognized the stature of the West Adams Church in Foursquare's history.

"I thought: You can't close that church down. It has too much history," he said. "It was one of the largest African American Foursquare churches around."

He took the job and held the first service in July 2000. The theme of the first year was "Loving, Acceptance and Forgiveness," as relationships were formed.

"Until this church becomes family, you have segments of people who remember church from way back when, or Church of the Harvest, and then people who have no recollection of any history," Leonard said.

"Some feel hurt or misused in the situation with Clarence. It's been challenging, difficult, but I believe we're turning a corner. The people understand that I mean business with relationships and forgiveness. There's no future in the past."

Leonard has built a staff around diversity, with whites, blacks and Hispanics reflecting the diverse neighborhoods around him. He brings in white students from nearby colleges for Sunday services and is even taking private Spanish lessons to equip him to reach the Hispanic community.

He wants to build a church from new converts, not transfer growth, and he is already encouraged by the attendance figures. "When I look at the numbers, I have to say this is God," he said. "In this kind of situation, I don't know that any person would want to come behind a Clarence McClendon and the situation that occurred here. I know I wouldn't. It has to be God."

Ron Williams, communications officer of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, said Leonard is "exceptional with people skills and is an outstanding teacher."

"He's also an outstanding musician, and we thought he would be

an appropriate person to assume the pastorate,” Williams added. “We’re thankful for the growth that has already occurred.”

For Leonard, the sooner the new congregation puts the past behind, the better.

“This church has always been a beacon light, and I want it to continue to be that. I want people from the community to come to us for answers.”

-Joel Kilpatrick