

Divorce News Shocks Tampa Congregation

Randy and Paula White are ending their marriage and splitting their ministry operations

One of the most prominent ministry couples in the United States has announced they will go their separate ways after nearly 18 years of marriage. Randy and Paula White, founders of Without Walls International Church in Tampa, Fla., broke the news to a stunned congregation on Aug. 23 without giving details about why they are divorcing.

"It's the most difficult decision I've ever had to make in my entire life," Randy White told the congregation. His wife stood by his side at the podium and promised to return to the church often to preach.

"This has been an ongoing process and journey," Paula White said. "But God is always faithful. God always carries you through the dark places of life."

In interviews with the Tampa Tribune, Randy White said numerous visits to counselors had not solved the problems in his marriage. He said he takes "100 percent responsibility" for the divorce—although both Whites said the breakup does not involve a third party.

"I want to apologize for the poor decisions I've made in my life, to my congregation and to the body of Christ," Randy White told the Tribune. "I think I've let a lot of people down."

He added that he regrets being seen in public with other women, noting that those incidents were innocent.

“It’s like hearing the news from your parents,” Without Walls member Frank Murillo told the Tribune after the divorce announcement. “They are great people. We all go through stuff. Pastor Randy will be here, and I will be here.”

Randy White plans to continue leading his 23,000-member church, which is more than \$20 million in debt despite collecting \$40 million in income last year. His wife will continue her multifaceted businesses and outreaches, along with her signature Paula White Today talk show, which airs on BET, CMT and other television channels.

The Whites told their congregation they had grown apart in recent years. Paula White currently spends her time in California, San Antonio and New York City, where she owns a condo in the Trump Tower and sponsors success seminars. At one time Randy White was preparing to launch a church in Malibu, Calif., a plan he is no longer pursuing.

In recent months Paula White has aligned her ministry with Rick Hawkins, founding pastor of Family Praise Center in San Antonio. She has purchased a \$681,000 home there and accepted a part-time leadership position at the church, which is now led by Hawkins’ son, Dustin.

With their folksy, flamboyant style, the Whites have gained a strong following in both white and black churches in the United States and are known for pioneering innovative evangelism efforts, particularly in poor neighborhoods. But they also have generated controversy in recent years because

of their emphasis on financial prosperity.

The Tampa Tribune reported in June that Paula White's New York condo was valued at about \$3.5 million and the couple's Tampa home has an assessed value of \$2.2 million.

The Whites' ministry also owns a private jet and other properties. It is not clear yet how the Whites will divide their assets. The couple has four adult children, three from his first marriage and one from hers.

In an interview with Charisma, Paula White said the breakup of her marriage has been a deeply painful experience but that she will not let it stop her from fulfilling God's purpose for her life.

"I understand that I am a public figure, but this is a very private matter," she said. "[The divorce] is closure to a chapter, but it is not the end of the story. I'm very optimistic about the future."

In several ways the Whites' divorce breaks new ground in American religion because there are so few husband-and-wife teams in the nation's pulpits. Paula White long has been viewed as the stronger preacher. Her personal ministry generates \$50,000 to \$80,000 a week in donations and product sales, the Tribune said. She believes audiences will still support her when she begins her solo career.

Divorced ministers sometimes step down from ministry, at least for a season of rehabilitation. But the Whites did not mention any plans to take a break. Besides her bases in San Antonio and New York—from which she will manage her Life by Design

seminars—Paula White said she will maintain an office in Tampa.

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