

# Fire From Above

**It's been 10 years since the Pensacola, Florida, revival ignited hearts all over the world. Though the crowds have stopped coming, the impact has not been diminished.**

It started out as an ordinary Father's Day at a solid but unspectacular Florida church. But June 18, 1995, would turn out to be anything but an ordinary day at Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola.

The Sunday morning service, which featured the powerful preaching of a plain-talking evangelist named Steve Hill, stretched on for hours and resulted in hundreds of members experiencing an extraordinary move of God's power.

During the next five years, Brownsville opened its doors to some 3 million people from around the globe, including thousands of pastors who wanted their own taste of what came to be known as the Pensacola Outpouring. In time, some church historians declared the Brownsville revival the most significant congregation-based renewal of the 20th century.

Between 2000 and 2003, the four men who had served as the revival's most visible leaders departed, leaving many believers confused and angry. Church membership declined rapidly amid charges that these leaders as well as the church's new pastor had fumbled the precious spiritual riches God had placed in their care.

Then in September 2004 Hurricane Ivan—the last of four hurricanes to strike Florida that summer—unleashed its destructive power on Pensacola and the surrounding areas, demolishing houses and businesses, mowing down forests and utility poles, and wreaking havoc on a Gulf Coast community already acquainted with economic and social struggles.

The church is quieter now than it was in the early days of

revival. But Brownsville remains a “house of possibilities,” says 44-year-old Randy Feldschau, who has served as the church’s senior pastor since Thanksgiving 2003.

“My responsibility now is to shepherd the presence, anointing and fire of revival deposited in this place and help restore this body that gave of itself to the world without reservation for so long,” Feldschau says.

## **The Early Days**

On Father’s Day 1995, pastor John Kilpatrick was grieving the recent death of his mother, who had raised him on her own after his alcoholic father had abandoned the family.

Kilpatrick invited Steve Hill to preach that Sunday morning. The sermon on Psalm 77 (“I will remember the works of the Lord”) started out calm enough, but things heated up when Hill recalled “a tender time with Jesus” he had experienced at England’s Holy Trinity Brompton Church, a renewed Anglican congregation.

Before the service was over, hundreds of people had been profoundly touched by God’s presence, including Kilpatrick, who violated his own sense of strict pulpit decorum by falling flat on his back near the pulpit. He remained immobile for the next four hours, his suit jacket a rumpled mess and his Father’s Day carnation wilted and crushed.

Later Kilpatrick met with congregational leaders, who had spent years praying for revival. They agreed that God was moving and decided they should move with Him.

The church canceled its Sunday night service, scheduling a Monday evening revival service instead. Hill bowed out of his other scheduled speaking engagements, while Lindell Cooley, Brownsville’s worship leader, prepared music for the new revival services.

Visitors started showing up that first Monday night. In time the church opened its doors for Wednesday-through-Saturday evening revival services. During the revival's peak years, thousands of people lined up in the church parking lot before dawn and sat waiting in the hot Florida sun all day for a chance to enter the packed and chaotic sanctuary.

By 1997, Brownsville was the picture of an old-timey, Southern-fried, Holy Ghost revival, complete with lengthy and rapturous periods of singing and dancing; in-your-face, turn-or-burn sermons about sin, salvation and sanctification; and altars packed with hundreds of writhing or dead-still bodies of every imaginable age, race and socioeconomic condition.

Over time, nearly 200,000 people gave their lives to Jesus at these altars. And by fall 2000, more than 1,000 people who had been touched by the revival were taking classes at the Brownsville Revival School of Ministry (BRSM), run by a Greek-speaking, Messianic Jew named Michael Brown.

Thousands of pastors fell at Brownsville's altars, too, and after they brushed themselves off and went back to their home congregations, the spiritual refreshment and renewal they had experienced in Pensacola inspired an outbreak of mini-revivals that helped the Assemblies of God recover from a denominational dry spell.

But by early 1998, the revival's four leaders were already wondering when "the dove would fly"—their phrase for the anticipated eventual cooling of the revival's fires. Or as Cooley said at the time, "We need to look hard at ourselves and make sure we aren't perpetuating something God is finished with."

The tricky thing for Cooley and the other leaders was making sure they did nothing to either prematurely hasten or artificially delay the revival's inevitable conclusion.

They continually assessed the revival's staying power during

the next few years, but a significant number of Brownsville members, ex-members and former revival regulars now believe these leaders carelessly fumbled away the precious spiritual gifts God bestowed on Brownsville.

“God was not in the way the revival ended,” one ex-member and former fervent revivalist says.

### **Shepherds Leave, Sheep Grumble**

The first revival leader to leave was Steve Hill, who announced his departure in June 2000 on the fifth anniversary of the revival’s birth. He immediately returned to the kind of itinerant evangelistic ministry that had been his passion before revival broke out.

“God didn’t come through here for 3 million people,” Hill said that Sunday morning. “He did it for the 6 billion people in the world. If God has done all this, He has a plan!”

The four original revival leaders would not be together again until April 2005, for a reunion service taped by Trinity Broadcasting Network at Hill’s new Dallas-area congregation.

Shortly after Hill’s departure, the three remaining leaders agreed that God’s Spirit was still present in revival services—even if less dramatically than in the past. And they agreed that people were still coming to services with spiritual hunger—even if in fewer numbers. They decided to cut back on the number of evening revival services.

Kilpatrick says he considered resigning later in 2000, but a crisis at the BRSM forced him to wait.

In December 2000, the school’s board fired Michael Brown following a number of disagreements concerning the school’s direction, Brown’s leadership and his refusal to join the Assemblies of God. Within a month Brown had formed a new school, FIRE School of Ministry—which stands for Fellowship

for International Revival and Evangelism. Many of the original school's faculty and approximately half its 1,000 students went with him.

Brown was later reconciled with Brownsville leaders. Current president of BRSM, Keith Collins, and Brown estimate that together the two schools have graduated 1,000 students, half of whom are active in ministry today, 200 of those in 25 nations.

Kilpatrick says he considered resigning again in 2002, but on July 4 lightning struck the Brownsville sanctuary, causing a fire and resulting in water damage that required months of repair and the relocation of services to the church's Family Life Center. He felt called to see the congregation through the short-term crisis.

"I just couldn't leave the people in the lurch. I had to stay there and solidify things," he says.

The next revival leader to leave was worship leader Cooley, who announced his resignation on Sunday, October 12, 2003. Cooley relocated to Nashville, Tennessee, where he founded a new congregation and focuses on songwriting, performing and recording.

The following Sunday, October 19, 2003, was Pastor Appreciation Day, a chance for Brownsville members to honor the man who had been their pastor since 1982. But after a series of presentations in his honor, Kilpatrick stunned the congregation—as well as his new assistant, Randy Feldschau—by announcing his own resignation.

Kilpatrick's explanation for his "sudden" resignation is simple. "That morning on the platform, I heard the Holy Spirit say to me, 'I have now released you.' I knew then that ... for the good of the church it was time for me to go."

But some Brownsville members were angered to see their Pastor

Appreciation Day transformed into Pastor Resignation Day.

"His retirement shook this whole church up," Feldschau says.

Tempers were particularly high among Brownsville members and revival regulars who feared the church was losing its trusted spiritual shepherd.

Feldschau had served as an assistant pastor at Brownsville before accepting a position as a senior pastor elsewhere. Kilpatrick had called him in May 2003 and invited him to return as co-pastor.

"I agreed to come back," he says. "I love Brother Kilpatrick. And I love this church."

During the last two years a number of Brownsville members have criticized Feldschau for failing to honor and sustain the revival. But as he sees it, the revival continues, though in a different form than it took in its glory years. His assessment divides the last decade into three distinct stages.

Feldschau says Phase 1 covered the years 1995 to 2000, which he describes as the period of initial launch and acceleration.

"It takes a healthy church to maintain the fires of revival, and Brownsville did that," he says. "But as this congregation gave itself to the world during these years, this took a tremendous toll on the people, the staff, and even the building, with the tremendous wear and tear on our facilities."

Phase 2 began with the departure of Steve Hill in 2000 and continued through the departures of Cooley and Kilpatrick in 2003.

"As Pastor Kilpatrick and I discussed this phase, he often referred to it as 'landing the shuttle,'" Feldschau says. "After the initial launch and acceleration there was a period of transition from the earlier period of revival as we once

knew it.”

He says Phase 3 began with his election as senior pastor in late 2003. The last two years have been a period of trying and testing, and of restoration and renewal. Feldschau compares this phase to a space shuttle being repaired and refueled for its next mission.

## **A New Commission**

Visiting Brownsville today is a much different experience than it was during the high-power days of the late '90s. Back then, so many people came to the revival services they couldn't all fit in the sanctuary, and hundreds were crammed into the church cafeteria, choir room and nearby Family Life Center to catch a glimpse of services on TV screens. Now it's possible to stroll into a Friday evening revival service five minutes before it begins and find a seat near the front.

Numbers provide additional insight into the wrenching changes. Sunday morning attendance averaged 1,500 before the revival began, then grew to nearly double that during the peak years.

Today, fewer than 1,000 people attend Sunday morning services. There have also been declines in giving and significant turnover in the church's staff.

But Feldschau isn't looking back. He's focusing on getting Brownsville ready for its next divine assignment.

“This is a period where we are restoring Brownsville's identity as a local church,” he says. “I will never deny our heritage of revival. We are a revived church, and we have a responsibility to honor that.

“But we need to restore the dynamics of the local church at the same time we maintain the fruit of revival. Part of that means doing things like resurrecting the church's Sunday school classes and home groups, most of which were abandoned

in the chaos and craziness of revival.”

However, there’s more to the vision than simply rebuilding the local church.

Feldschau was less than a year into his tenure at Brownsville when Hurricane Ivan struck. And surprisingly, Ivan’s trail of devastation helped Feldschau begin to see the church’s next mission.

“Hurricane Ivan blew down our privacy fences, and for the first time we saw our neighbors,” he says.

Of the four hurricanes that ravaged Florida in 2004, the cruelest to Pensacola was Ivan, which hit September 16.

Six months later one can still see signs of the storm’s destructive power from the air. An estimated 40,000 houses in Pensacola’s Escambia County and neighboring Santa Rosa County are still covered by bright blue tarps that are filling in for shingles until the roofs can be repaired.

And on a Friday afternoon in January, nearly 50 Pensacola-area pastors and parachurch leaders huddled in a popular Pensacola restaurant so they could meet representatives of Operation Blessing and find out how to get cash grants to rebuild their ravaged neighborhoods.

The unprecedented meeting, which brought together pastors from different churches, denominations, neighborhoods and races, was organized by Feldschau and leaders at Brownsville and the BRSM. But the meeting is only a part of the vision of Pentecostal social ministry Feldschau is aggressively promoting at Brownsville.

“It is time for Pentecostals to embrace the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25 and take the fire of revival out of the house and into the streets through social ministry,” he told Charisma.

As part of Brownsville's program of social ministry, the church has started the Hope Center, which will provide job training, life skills, drug rehabilitation and life coaching to some of the needy Pensacola residents who live in the troubled neighborhoods surrounding the church.

"The world is looking for a Jesus that will meet them at their point of need," Feldschau told his congregation during a Sunday morning sermon recently.

"We're Pentecostal people, which means we are reactionary people," he tells them. "We like big events. We like to get people saved, get them filled and report the numbers to [our denominational headquarters]. We want high-impact, low-maintenance Christianity."

But true spiritual service is more like being a parent, he says. It's slow, messy, painful and dirty.

"This community is looking for a true Christian. If they are going to rise up, we must stoop down. Are we willing to stoop down in order that this community can rise up?"

It's still too early to tell how the members of Brownsville will receive this new commission. But it appears many in this congregation that spent itself to reach the world will roll up their sleeves to reach out to their next-door neighbors.

If so, it's clear that God isn't through with Brownsville Assembly.

### **Where Are They Now?**

John Kilpatrick

THEN: Pastor, Brownsville Assembly of God

**LEFT BROWNSVILLE:** Resigned during a Pastor Appreciation service in October 2003

**NOW:** President of John Kilpatrick Ministries, a ministry to pastors that will host its first national pastors event, The

Gathering, this June in Daphne, Alabama () .

"I was 14 when God called me to preach, and one of the things He called me to do was 'to minister to My ministers,'" Kilpatrick says. "What God speaks isn't always for that hour, but for another ... season of our lives."

**LOOKING BACK:** "For God to take a church in a poor section of a little seaside town named Pensacola ... and to do what He did on that little piece of real estate is something I'll never get over.

"I remember so many times during the revival, I said to God, 'Thank you for a seat on the platform.' I felt like an observer rather than the pastor to whose church revival came.

"But just as the revival was a great ecstasy, it was a great pain in a lot of different ways. It was a shock to see the level of satanic attack leveled against me and the other leaders."

### **Steve Hill**

THEN: Evangelist of the Brownsville revival

**LEFT BROWNSVILLE:** Announced his departure in June 2000 on the fifth anniversary of the revival's beginning

NOW: Pastor of Heartland Fellowship Church in Dallas (), which he founded in 2003. It now has 1,100 members.

"Life is full of seasons," Hill says. "Brownsville hosted an international revival that drew millions of people from around the world. That was my calling for that five-year period, and then God moved me on.

"After Brownsville, I traveled everywhere, but I realized, if I keep this up, I'm not going to raise up any disciples. So that's the current season: pastoring a church where I can disciple people."

**LOOKING BACK:** “What an awesome experience it was to be a part of such a move of God and to see people being touched all over the world. I pinch myself to think that I got to be a part of that.”

### **Michael Brown**

THEN: President, Brownsville Revival School of Ministry (BRSM)

**LEFT BROWNSVILLE:** Fired by the BRSM board in December 2000. The next month he started a new school with some of the former BRSM faculty and students. Brown and the Brownsville leaders were reconciled in December 2002.

**NOW:** President, FIRE (Fellowship for International Revival and Evangelism) School of Ministry, located near Charlotte, North Carolina (). The school has given birth to FIRE Church, a congregation of nearly 400 people.

Brown also has continued writing. His latest project was a volume on Jeremiah that is part of Zondervan’s Expositor’s Bible Commentary series.

**LOOKING BACK:** “To me, being a part of the Brownsville revival was an awesome privilege, but it mainly whetted my appetite to see God do something even more amazing.

“Historically, it’s still early to assess the revival’s significance, but from the vantage point of 10 years, it is safe to say that this was one of the most powerful local church revivals of the 20th century and that it had a ripple effect around America and the world.”

### **Lindell Cooley**

THEN: Worship leader, Brownsville Assembly of God

**LEFT BROWNSVILLE:** Cooley felt “a stirring to leave” in 1999 but says he stayed “because I loved the people.” He announced his resignation in October 2003 without knowing that pastor John Kilpatrick would resign the following Sunday. “If I had

known, I wouldn't have left the church then," Cooley says.

**NOW:** Pastor of Grace Church Nashville (), a 250-member congregation founded in 2004 that incorporates liturgical, evangelical and charismatic traditions and meets Sunday mornings in a YMCA in Franklin, Tennessee.

Cooley supports himself by traveling and performing, and is working on a solo album sequel to his 2001 Integrity release, *Open Up the Sky*.

**LOOKING BACK:** "I thank God that He allowed me to witness this awesome thing. I have been touched by the Lord in such a wonderful way that I will always cherish. It changed me. It changed my life. And it was a joy for us to be a part of it."

---

Steve Rabey is the author of *Revival in Brownsville: Pensacola, Pentecostalism, and the Power of American Revivalism* (Thomas Nelson). His latest book is *The Way of the Mystics*, with Catholic songwriter John Michael Talbot (Jossey-Bass).