

Harlem Church, Born Out of Racism, Forgives Rejection 85 Years Later

Bethel Gospel Assembly reconciled in November with the white congregation that turned away its originators

Bethel Gospel Assembly, a black congregation in Harlem, N.Y., bathed its 85th anniversary service Nov. 10 with forgiveness by seeking unity with the white church whose forebears' racist actions had inadvertently birthed the Harlem church.

Bethel's roots date back to 1915 when two young black women attempted to join Glad Tidings Hall, a mostly white mission on West 42nd Street near Times Square. They accepted Christ as Savior during revival meetings there but were refused membership because of their race.

"Bethel was born out of rejection," pastor Carlton T. Brown said. "Remembering our origin we are always receptive to people of all backgrounds."

The Glad Tidings mission later evolved into Glad Tidings Tabernacle, a flagship Pentecostal church in New York City and an early member of the Assemblies of God. Robert and Marie Brown, noted Pentecostal pioneers, founded the church, which moved to its current location on West 33rd Street in 1921. Today Glad Tidings has 600 members, of whom 90 percent are black and Hispanic.

Lillian Kreager, a compassionate white member of Glad Tidings, rode uptown to Harlem on the subway to disciple the 15-year-old converts. Her fiancé broke their engagement after warning

her against mixing with blacks. Weekly home meetings followed.

Bethel was born in 1917 with 12 Christians who gathered at the first service in quarters that rented for \$10 a month. Today the independent Pentecostal church has more than 1,200 members and occupies a former junior high school sitting on a square block at Madison Avenue and 120th Street. The building is worth almost \$20 million.

Eunice Scott, 79, a former member of Bethel, recalls how the two women had tenderhearted attitudes many years after the incident.

"It didn't hurt their belief in Jesus," she said. "They didn't hold a grudge. They still talked highly of Glad Tidings."

The same spirit of forgiveness and acceptance is embedded in Bethel's culture. "That openness to racial reconciliation is in our DNA," Brown said. "All are welcome."

At a four-hour anniversary service, 1,800 members from Bethel, Glad Tidings and Crossway Christian Center Assembly of God in Bronx, N.Y., worshiped in unity, and the service seemed to snuff out any lingering hint of racial friction.

"I don't see a black or white heaven," shouted Darryl Doleman, worship leader. "We're not here to celebrate big shots. We're here to celebrate Jesus!"

Speakers from black and white churches echoed the racial reconciliation theme.

“It isn’t the Assemblies of God,” said Thomas Trask, general superintendent of the denomination. “It’s the kingdom of God. It’s right and proper that we gather together to love one another in the love of Jesus. We bless you. We commend you.”

Facing the audience, Brown bear-hugged Carl Keyes, current pastor of Glad Tidings. “Carlton Brown is my man!” Keyes exclaimed. “He’s special. He’s not a friend, he’s my brother.”

Keyes told Charisma: “The role here today is to be friends with Carlton Brown. We found we are of like mind, and we are two of the oldest Pentecostal churches in New York City. We have come to affirm and acknowledge one another and join together and see where God is going to take us in the future.”

Mark T. Gregori, pastor of Crossway Christian Center, orchestrated the reconciliation event. When he arrived in New York as a church planter in 1977, Glad Tidings’ former pastor Stanley Berg assisted him.

Bethel’s retired former pastor Bishop Ezra Williams also nourished Gregori by conducting street meetings with him in the South Bronx. Williams, 74 and recovering from cancer, served on the board of Brooklyn Teen Challenge and helped Teen Challenge workers in an urban ministry among street gangs.

Bethel, Glad Tidings and Crossway have committed to closer ties. “This is a new day and a new era, and we’ve decided to link arms and go forward together,” Keyes said.

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