

Miami Pastor Says It's Time to Release an 'Army of Compassion'

Rich Wilkerson, cousin of David Wilkerson, is building a prototype for city transformation at Trinity Church

Catch a glimpse of Trinity Church on the west side of Interstate 95 in Miami and you'll see a giant hand-me-down tent once used for the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, a structure that today is a church home to some 1,400 people who are drawn to pastor Rich Wilkerson's preaching and community outreach.

Wilkerson, who is white, pastors a congregation made up of Jamaican, Bahamian, Haitian, Latin American and African American members. Many were already familiar with Wilkerson when he took up the Trinity pastorate, as he had held several evangelistic meetings there and members liked him. The color of his skin didn't matter to them.

"He's a man of God. That's what matters," Trinity member Victoria Phillips said.

"It's the spirit of a man that matters," 20-year-old member Francisco Barmarat said. "I love him. He doesn't compromise the truth."

Wilkerson says his original vision for what he's doing today was inspired by God almost a decade ago, eventually leading him four years ago to Trinity Church, which at that time was 300 members strong. The third-generation Assemblies of God pastor and first cousin to pastor-evangelist David Wilkerson

was a traveling evangelist based in Tacoma, Wash., in 1994, when God spoke to him during a 40-day fast.

“Here I was traveling all over the country and not eating and God gives me a spiritual vision of impacting 39 of the nation’s largest cities,” he said.

Wilkerson had seen suffering and despair in America’s urban areas and believed only God could give people the kind of hope that would change their lives. He envisioned churches that could touch the hungry and homeless.

“We needed to build a prototype of what my vision was. And this wonderful church in Miami became available,” Wilkerson said.

The 42-year-old church campus and its seven buildings are themselves a work of urban regeneration. A former auto-repair shop now stores bulk food for the church’s 7th Avenue Food Bank, where more than 2,900 families are registered to receive free food every other month. A tiny single-family home has been turned into the Urban Mercy Clinic, where 3,000 people have received free medical care from volunteer physicians.

A former two-story hotel on the church property is the Peacemakers Family Service Center offices, where housing assistance, crisis counseling, legal services, referral services, job-training placement and training, child care and youth services are available. The church’s youth building, complete with pool tables, ping-pong tables, televisions and video games, houses a weekday soup kitchen where 200,000 meals have been served to the homeless and hungry.

It's the kind of partnership with a community that Jim Towey, the Bush administration's director of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, envisions. Towey held a roundtable discussion in Miami recently, which Trinity staff attended.

"Churches and other faith-based organizations such as Trinity Church can be the most effective healers in our communities when it comes to turning people's lives around," Towey told Charisma.

Wilkerson says ministries like his are not for the faint of heart. He asks others to examine themselves first, to see if God is calling them to join the "armies of compassion" in the trenches.

"I would call to senior pastors and men and women of high degrees of experience in the Christian ministry and education to seek God about leaving all to go to one of America's greatest cities."

Denise Zoldan