

No More Urban Slavery

How Bishop George McKinney is helping residents in a troubled San Diego community find freedom from gangs, drugs and hopelessness.

Hundreds of mourners file into Greenwood Memorial Park and Mortuary Garden Chapel in San Diego as a string of clergymen and city officials line the pulpit to eulogize the deceased.

Geraldine Thomas can barely stand under the weight of the tragic loss of her son. She holds tightly to her husband and struggles to walk down the center aisle.

"My baby!" she cries. "My baby!"

Her wailing pierces the air, provoking other mourners to weep. Joseph Thomas Jr., a resident of San Diego, died January 21, 2006, after members of his own gang shot and killed him. He was 19.

"The road to gang activity leads to a road with no exit sign; it leads to death," says Bishop George McKinney, a slight, soft-spoken Pentecostal preacher who has been ministering in the crime-ridden community of Encanto since 1959.

McKinney knows firsthand what he is talking about. Over the years he has eulogized his fair share of gang members and victims of violence. But he can never get used to the pain left in the aftermath of so many senseless killings.

For some of the people attending the funeral today, the events unfolding before them seem like *déjà vu*. They have lost

sisters, brothers and others to gang wars.

A processional forms to allow attendees to get one last view of Thomas. But as they shuffle past the ivory-colored casket they get an unexpected surprise. Instead of seeing Thomas, they see themselves staring into a mirror.

The whole event was staged—Thomas' parents, his friends, the pallbearers. An organization of former gang members known as Overcoming Gangs (OG) arranged the mock funeral to help deter youth from choosing a life of crime.

They sought out McKinney because he and his church, St. Stephen's Cathedral Church of God in Christ, located on San Diego's south side, offer ministry to people looking for a way out of the life. "The OGs asked to meet with me because they couldn't do it without God," says McKinney. "They told me, 'We need Him.'"

The 74-year-old pastor and his late wife, Jean, founded St. Stephen's Cathedral in 1962 to demonstrate God's love in an area wracked by crime and unemployment. Today the ministry is composed of 500 families and is working to leave a lasting impression on the City by the Bay.

McKinney doesn't consider himself a lone ranger in inner-city ministry. He says there are numerous pastors and faith-based organizations working to curb gang activity. But his efforts to preach Christ in urban settings has earned him the respect of civic leaders such as California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Billy Graham, who, along with the National Association of Evangelicals, recommended McKinney for U.S. Senate chaplain in 2003.

In 2006, McKinney convened a meeting at St. Stephen's Cathedral to encourage leaders of rival gangs talk out their differences. "Thank God, the meeting concluded with no shootings or killings," he says.

McKinney says gang violence is just one of several modern-day "slave masters" that seek to destroy individuals, families and communities. "They are the plagues of our inner cities, the plagues of our suburbs, the plagues of our youth and wage earners and even our well-to-do," he writes in his book, *The New Slavemasters*.

But as someone who has dedicated his life to helping people find freedom through Christ, McKinney is convinced that the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and practical ministry can destroy every shackle and set communities free.

Breaking the Chains

When a Dutch slave ship arrived at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, it marked the beginning of slavery in America. African-Americans suffered the brutality of the practice for more than 200 years before the United States' bloody Civil War led to its abolition.

More than 140 years have passed since American slaves were emancipated in 1865. But McKinney says the evil that was unleashed nearly 400 years ago still plagues the nation—though today it has no regard for race, religion or class.

Today, a form of spiritual bondage exists under the guise of teen pregnancy, drug addiction and other ills. He sees the brutality it wields on people in the community surrounding his

church every day. Yet he knows Christ can set anyone free.

Tony Stocking spent years in a gang and was a top-selling drug dealer and pimp with numerous prostitutes in his employ. But a turning point came in 1988 when officers from the San Diego Police Department raided his home looking for prostitutes.

Stocking says he was thrown to the floor, stomped, kicked and beaten until his neck was broken. He filed a lawsuit against the department and was awarded \$80,000 for injuries he sustained during the altercation.

But the ordeal caused him to see his need for a Savior. He took his mother's advice and visited St. Stephen's Cathedral one Sunday. There he accepted Christ.

Today instead of selling drugs and sex, Stocking is a real estate agent who is grateful to be free from a life of crime. He often shares his story with teens at the church. "I witness to youth about fast-talking young men who try to corrupt their minds with the things that had me bound," Stocking says.

Glossing over unpleasant issues isn't an option for McKinney. With a bachelor's degree in sociology, a master's in divinity and a doctorate in philosophy, the ex-probation officer knows people are looking for an answer. "We are faithful in preaching and teaching the gospel," he says. "I tell them God's grace and God's plan of salvation is revealed in Jesus Christ and they can have His peace."

St. Stephen's elder Ronald Randle knows how it feels to experience God's forgiveness and restoration. He and his wife became members of St. Stephen's in 1992, and Randle soon

became McKinney's assistant, traveling with him on ministry trips to nations as diverse as Israel and Trinidad.

But after an illness, he became addicted to codeine, and the drug dependency eventually cost him his home and his marriage. "I allowed a crack in my foundation," Randle, 49, admits.

He managed to conquer the addiction after three years. Randle tried to "throw in the towel," but he says, "God threw it back. ... [The church] reached out to me and worked with me until I got it together."

Randle moved into Phoebe House, a residential drug-treatment facility St. Stephen's operates. There he kicked the addiction for good and eventually reunited with his wife. On Christmas Eve 2005 the couple was remarried at the church.

"We must serve the whole person," McKinney says. "There's no way you can win them if you don't help meet their emotional, spiritual or physical needs through deliverance ministry, counseling and other means. You can't win against the devil with semiautomatic weapons; it takes the Holy Spirit's power and guidance. "

Restoring Lives

Deirdre "Dee Dee" Vernon has been a committed Christian for more than a decade. But her tall, slender frame and model-like looks give little indication of her former life. Biracial with caramel-colored skin and hazel eyes, at age 13 Vernon found herself fighting other girls every day because they ridiculed her for the way she looked.

When a member of the Cryptlets—the sister gang to the notorious Compton Crypts—saw the teen trying to fight off 10 girls, she jumped in to help her. That’s when Vernon joined the gang. As part of her initiation, she had to be “jumped in.”

“I had to walk down the line,” she says. “They spit on me, pushed me and kicked me. I was unrecognizable when they finished. But I didn’t fall, stumble or cry.”

Vernon says today that she embraced gang life because she wanted the acceptance of her peers. She remained a Cryptlet until she was 33 years old and says her mission was to “hurt, harm and maim,” though she refused to use drugs and managed to leave the gang without a criminal record. Now 47, Vernon doubts she would have made it out alive had it not been for St. Stephen’s.

“My mother and Bishop McKinney constantly prayed for me,” Vernon remembers. She says because the church showed her love, she found the courage to leave the gang. She eventually rededicated her life to Christ and earned a business degree.

Although Vernon is considered a success story, McKinney knows that many people in the church continue to struggle with their pasts. He says it takes a commitment to prayer, personal integrity and disciplined action to see lasting change.

Whether the conflict is between feuding gangs or angry spouses, McKinney says Christians must respond to crisis from a biblical perspective. He sees too many Christian couples who view divorce as a means of solving marital problems.

“When a problem comes up, we are just as likely as unbelievers to call on a lawyer to begin dissolution [of the marriage] rather than look at the Christian alternative, which is resurrection, reconciliation and forgiveness,” says McKinney, a licensed marriage, family and child counselor, who worked in private practice for 15 years. “We have seen it work in marriage.”

In fact, every ministry at the church was birthed out of a felt need in the community. In the 1960s, teachers began asking to be relocated to schools in more desirable neighborhoods. The district officials were hard-pressed to find quality educators willing to remain in troubled areas.

As a result, McKinney began recruiting what he calls “educational missionaries” to teach at St. Stephen’s Christian School. He enlisted teachers from top-tier schools such as Yale, Harvard and Stanford universities; hired his wife to serve as principal; and paid the young, idealistic Christians a modest annual salary of \$25,000 to work at the school. The ministry continues today as an after-school learning center contracted by San Diego City Schools to tutor students who are failing in their classes.

McKinney says not every church in the U.S. will deal with gang violence. But there are countless other opportunities for churches to reach their cities, though many ministries don’t seize those moments.

“In the inner city, church buildings are the most valuable real estate property, but many of them are only used for a few hours on Sunday and sometimes an hour or two one evening a week,” he says. “Why not put these facilities to use as after-school learning centers and recruit retired teachers, social

workers and parents as volunteers, and teach kids math and reading?”

McKinney considers inner-city ministry rewarding work—even when it means putting his life on the line. He says one Sunday a man entered the church hiding a sawed-off shotgun.

When the altar call was made, the gunman went forward. But instead of shooting McKinney, the man accepted Christ and gave the shotgun to the pastor, telling McKinney, “I won’t need this anymore.”

Faith for the Future

St. Stephen’s Cathedral has remained a constant in an area where guns and gangs are an increasing threat. But McKinney says he has many reasons to remain hopeful. He says God has protected his five adult sons, George, Grant, Gregory, Gordon and Glenn, who are all born again.

St. Stephen’s is doing what it can to keep the area family-friendly, and that means providing affordable housing, quality education and gainful employment. The long stretch of Imperial Highway where the church sits bears proof of St. Stephen’s impact.

Through its Housing Our People Economically (HOPE) Corp., the church has helped build or rehabilitate homes for area residents with funding from the San Diego Housing Authority, private donors and congregants.

In 1993, St. Stephen’s Retirement Corp. built a 60-unit

retirement center next to the church and in 2005 completed the Jean C. McKinney Manor, a \$7 million, 50-unit residential complex named in honor of McKinney's late wife. "I tell God thank you all the time," says 66-year-old resident Carmen Rodriquez.

McKinney's son, executive pastor George A. McKinney, says the church is positioning itself for continued development in the future. "We are looking into financial investments," he says, "and we're incorporating more technology in what we do to reach the city, state and the nation with inner-city ministry."

The elder McKinney knows he can't rescue every person held captive by sin. But he is determined to offer relevant ministry. "The kids need after-school programs; young men and women need to know there is a way out of drugs, gang life and crime; husbands and wives must resist the temptation to divorce and work to keep their families together," he says.

After decades of eulogizing gangsters and preaching the gospel in the inner-city, McKinney is still driven by the same passion that led him to plant a church in one of San Diego's roughest neighborhoods. He wants to introduce them to Jesus, the one who died to set them free.

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Shining a Light in the Inner City

Despite escalating crime and violence, Bishop George McKinney

refuses to leave his neighborhood

Although his church is located in a high crime neighborhood in San Diego, Bishop George McKinney is convinced he must not leave the area. The founding pastor of St. Stephen's Cathedral Church of God in Christ has planted his stakes even deeper in a community characterized by routine shootings.

"I enjoy immensely working in the inner city, but we are often met with failure in the work that we do," McKinney explains.

He is referring to people, especially teens and young adults who have succumbed to drugs, gangs and other activity that often leads to premature death.

The gang and homicide unit of the San Diego Police Department reports that more than 230 gang-related crimes—from murder and assault to property damage—were committed in an eight-month period last year. The rising number of deaths from gang-related crossfire provoked San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders to form a commission targeting gang prevention and intervention.

McKinney is concerned that others will die if something isn't done to address the high unemployment rate in many inner-city neighborhoods. "The first step in revitalizing an area is to first offer the people hope through a relationship with Jesus," he says. "Then we must get them job-ready with proper training and education."

The pastor says gang members often come to him for help in finding good-paying jobs. But without proper training and funding, it is difficult to find employment for untrained workers. "We don't have the means to keep up with the demand,"

he says.

In 2003, then Gov. Gray Davis gave St. Stephen's nonprofit a \$400,000 grant to train local residents for work. Today those funds are depleted, but McKinney hopes private foundations will begin to underwrite job-readiness programs.

McKinney admits that reaching urban areas is difficult, and he understands why some of his congregants would want the church to move. But he is determined to stay put. "I cannot leave," he says. "We must continue to be a lighthouse in an area where shipwrecks are more likely to occur."