

North Carolina Consultant Gives Up Income to Launch Urban Ministry

Wilmington pastor Rick Stoker believes passionately that revival is locked within 'people we see sleeping in our doorways'

Pastor Rick

Stoker can put up with some pain if it means seeing the gospel change lives among the street people who live near his storefront church.

Recently Stoker had just finished soothing the hurt feelings of a prostitute who had been offended by something said while she waited in the feeding line at his church in Wilmington, N.C. With Bible in hand, Stoker then climbed onto the stage to begin preaching.

"When I turned my back, she began to beat me with a dog chain," he said. "It left a big welt, and I wound up getting treated in the emergency room.

"But it was the devil who really got hurt," he added. "When she got out of jail [for an unrelated offense] she came back into my women's home to be disciplined as a born-again believer. I think a pop or two across the back is worth that."

This seedier side of Wilmington doesn't seem like the kind of place you'd find someone like Stoker, who gave up a six-figure yearly salary as a surgical consultant for a team of orthopedic surgeons and took the courses that earned him his

minister's ordination.

Stoker's spiritual fire was lit last year during a visit to the Los Angeles Dream Center, a ministry housed in the former Queen of Angels hospital where 26-year-old Pentecostal pastor Matthew Barnett shepherds a flock of about 500 ex-gangbangers, runaways, Skid Row homeless and prostitutes. Stoker returned to the historic, tourist-filled port city of Wilmington, his new passion fueled by the same vision for aggressive search-and-rescue missions to the inner city that he had witnessed in Los Angeles.

With 5,000 Christians volunteering at the Los Angeles center each year, replicated Dream Centers are sprouting everywhere. Stoker said any sold-out minister can repeat the motif and believes the 21st-century church will look a lot like his.

"There is no way—scripturally—out of what I am doing," Stoker said. "Jesus told us to sow our lives into people who are hurting. They don't need a sandwich wrapped in tinfoil thrown from a Mercedes. A pack of M&Ms at Christmas won't change their heart."

In 1998 he founded First Fruit ministries and began feeding a few dozen homeless people. In the year since his trip West he has acquired a 42-bed men's shelter, donated by the city's Bethesda Christian Center and pastor Clarence Shavers.

Each week Stoker's crew serves 1,100 meals. His weekly church services, held in a red corrugated-tin building in the city's slums, attract more than 200. He is refurbishing a donated house across the street for Bible study, and he bought the house next door for \$15 from a crack dealer who came to his

service and then to Christ.

The ex-crack house, renovated by volunteers, is a women's home, housing a half dozen former prostitutes, some who smoked rock cocaine in the very rooms where experienced missionary Susan Miller is now discipling them.

"You don't have to be some great Holy Ghost-filled man spitting fire on the ground to have a homeless ministry and get people saved," he said. "But this is not about giving out a tract. It's not about saying the sinners' prayer with someone and patting them on the back and scooting them back into the world.

"It's about sowing your life in people every day. But I know if you get a community of the people who come to my church born again and on fire for Jesus, they will change any city. I believe that this is an intricate part of God's plan for the last days. It takes people who have been in the crack houses to go back and get others."

On a recent Sunday evening Charisma went with Stoker while he fed a group of homeless people sleeping beside the county courthouse. Later in front of a crack house, a disheveled man named Perry declared that he wanted to change his life. Stoker prayed with him, placed both hands on the man's shoulders then told him he would help him find a job, house him in his shelter and allow him to wash his dirty clothes at his house.

"I'll pray with you and for you," he ended. "And you can learn the Bible at my kitchen table."

Stoker has inspired other Christians to start feeding programs

in surrounding towns. He said that every Christian who walks past a homeless person is bypassing the Great Commission.

“Everybody waits for a great man or woman of God to come to their city to speak forth revival. What we really need to do is create revival fire out of the people we see sleeping in our doorways. You don’t have to have a [former] hospital like the [Los Angeles] Dream Center to do this. But you have to live with it, or it doesn’t work.” □