

Pastor Heads National Effort to Fund Inner Cities

Bishop Harold Ray of Florida wants to reform urban economies through an investment co-op

Bishop Harold Ray thinks that churches have done a poor job of dealing with the economic plight of the inner cities. To help remedy that, Ray is spearheading a nationwide push for churches to partner with government and business in investing money in urban communities through the National Center for Faith Based Initiative.

"You cannot be concerned with the ultimate soul of man without also being concerned with the

ultimate issues in his life," said Ray, who pastors Redemptive Life Fellowship in West Palm Beach, Fla. "The end of this objective is not proselytizing. The end is economic rejuvenation."

Ray's methods are unorthodox. At Redemptive Life, where many of the National Center's models are being employed, the church has operated a travel agency, a retail store in a

local mall and a technology center. It also has been heavily involved in local real estate, banking and political activity. The for-profit businesses and nonprofit economic development arms are maintained as legal entities separate from the church.

Also planned by the center are the launch of a national online-investment center, financial-training network, national tax and accounting center, national law center, and an insurance and investment network in cooperation with Prudential. Each will be wholly owned by a National Center

company, but the strategy depends heavily upon corporate partnerships and grant money.

The center is also developing community outreaches that educate and train urban residents and incubate new businesses. Its board of governors list reads like a who's who of African American church leaders and includes T.D. Jakes, Eddie Long, Floyd Flake, Charles Blake and Carlton Pearson.

The organization will be staffed by full-time professionals at 12 regional hubs, or "embassies." The West Palm Beach-based headquarters will be a clearinghouse for funds.

To guard against internal financial problems, Ray has set up extensive internal and external accountability structures. The center's first hire was a tax accountant, and the international professional-services company PricewaterhouseCoopers audits the organization annually.

The open endorsement of faith-based initiatives by both presidential candidates in the 2000 campaign improved the political climate for Ray's ministry. Ray is well-connected to local and national power brokers, making frequent trips to Washington to meet with congressmen. He rejects the notion that government and business involvement dilutes the mission of the church.

"The separation of church and state is a fiction," he said. "The nation is the kingdom of God, period."

Ray admits his mission is focused on the urban, largely African American poor. "There is a misperception that this is a black thing and not a kingdom thing," he said. "It is a prophetic mandate. I have a prophetic mandate to reach our people. [African Americans are] the constituency most susceptible to exploitation by greed-mongers."

He wants to reclaim the realm of influence latent in the inner cities. Ray plans to mobilize the economic power of urban

citizens to encourage outside investment beyond the National Center strategy.

“Our report card is economic,” he said. “We’re going to be taking a good, hard look at the reinvestment policies of corporations [in the inner cities].”

Ray also wants to encourage suburban churches to stop neglecting the systemic poverty of inner-city neighborhoods. He says that these churches have been slow to recognize the Federal Reserve policies that have contributed to urban flight and to remember that they have a responsibility first to the poor in their own country.

“We’ve got good, majority-culture churches sending money to the missions field and not to the inner cities,” he said.

The economic empowerment of urban dwellers is at the core of Ray’s mandate. “Government has become program-driven, and that has fostered a dependency modality,” he said.

In a self-published book titled, *Creating Wealth, Determining Destiny*, he explains his vision for urban renewal.

“God expects us to take dominion,” he writes. “We can make an impressive march toward that goal through the birthing, developing and support of businesses owned and operated by believers.”

According to Ray, the model has been working in West Palm Beach. “There has been a birthing of a spirit of a people. A ‘can do’ spirit. We have had to work some years to make that happen,” he said. “If the wealth of the wicked is to be laid up for the just, then there is some more work we need to do.”