

Standing for Freedom in Memphis

Apostle Alton R. Williams took a bold step when he built the 72-foot Statue of Liberation Through Christ on church property. Here's how his church is claiming a city for God.

A reinterpretation of the Statue of Liberty stands tall in Memphis, Tennessee, overlooking a busy intersection in a city recently listed among the nation's most violent.

Officially named the Statue of Liberation Through Christ, the 72-foot remake of America's famous symbol of freedom holds a golden cross in her right hand and a stone tablet representing the Ten Commandments in her left. The name "Jehovah" is written on her crown, and on her cheek is a tear, symbolizing her concern about the United States' departure from its Christian roots.

"That's one of the biggest sculptures we've made, so we're pretty proud of it," says sculptor Ryan Bessant of Heavy Industries Theming Corporation in Alberta, Canada. Bessant says his firm has never constructed anything like it before. "Not even close," he says.

Located in a suburban community where crime is on the rise and too many businesses are moving to other parts of town, the conspicuous green statue sends an important message, says Apostle Alton R. Williams, who designed the statue and had it set on the campus of his World Overcomers Outreach Ministries Church.

"We praise God for [the original] Lady Liberty's message of

freedom from tyranny, dictatorship, communism and monarchy," he writes in his book *The Lord's Lady Liberty*. "Yet ... it is spiritual liberation that opens the door to man's complete liberation in all other areas of life: physically, mentally, emotionally and financially."

But he says the statue was also meant to be a prophetic symbol to his community and the nation, proclaiming that America must return to God through Christ. "I know God established this nation," he says. "And from the very beginning, when you read what the Founding Fathers said, it was intended to be a Christian nation."

Unveiled last July 4, the statue is slowly gaining attention and has predictably become a flashpoint for controversy. Transforming the Statue of Liberty into a Christian symbol is an inspiration to some and an insult to others. But whether loved or hated, the statue is provoking discussion about America's Christian roots and the role of religion in public life. "It's doing what I want it to do," Williams says, "and that's to make people talk."

Making a Statement

A Baptist turned charismatic pastor, Williams says he has always been concerned about the nation's spiritual condition. But his call to remind the nation of its Christian heritage came into focus after he read materials written by historian David Barton. "I was astonished at what the history books had not told us about America," Williams says.

Founder of WallBuilders, a Texas-based organization that teaches people about the nation's Christian roots, Barton is

considered an expert on America's founding era.

"In the last 40 to 50 years we've so secularized everything that if religion shows up with anything it becomes offensive," says Barton, who has served as a consultant to state and federal legislators. "Who would have ever thought that saying the Pledge of Allegiance would have become a religious exercise?"

Although some consider a Christian representation of the Statue of Liberty to be a paradox, Williams doesn't see it as exclusive of other religions. On the contrary, he says his statue is an invitation to people of all faiths. "[Christ] will save the Buddhist, He'll save the Islamic person," Williams says. "Christ welcomes all people from all nations."

Some say the statue causes them to reflect on their relationships with God. "When I pass by the statue, it reminds me of how much Jesus sacrificed for me and that He loves me," one Memphian wrote in a local newspaper opinion.

But other locals say they prefer not to look at the imposing figure on their daily commute, and some go out of their way to avoid it. The church is fencing in the statue and providing 24-hour security, says Constance Jones, who oversees the maintenance and promotion of the statue. Security guard Edward Wilson says some drivers yell remarks about the statue as they pass by, but most people are just curious.

To date, both the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Christian Coalition of America say they have not received any complaints about the statue. But Internet bloggers and local critics have called it "tacky, offensive, cheap

marketing” and even “a freak show.”

A small number of protesters have picketed the church, accusing Williams and his predominantly African-American congregation of idol worship—a charge the pastor flatly rejects. “Lady Liberation is not to be worshiped,” Williams says. “World Overcomers neither worships the statue nor advocates anyone else to do it.”

Williams says African-Americans have especially objected to the statue, with many questioning whether the U.S. should be “glorified,” considering the nation’s history of racism. He addressed that concern in the book *From Slavery to Lady Liberation*, which explores the theory that Lady Liberty was originally designed to portray the unshackling of African-American slaves.

Others have criticized Williams for using church resources to build a statue in a community with significant economic and social needs. But the pastor says he doesn’t regret spending \$260,000 to build Lady Liberation. He believes it is just one expression of his calling as an apostle.

“Our job is to defend truth,” he says of apostolic ministers. “If we see anything that is trying to bring confusion or deception, there is something in us that wants us to bring truth.”

Adrienne Vinson, who has been a member of World Overcomers for six years, says although Williams kept the statue “under wraps” until its unveiling last year, most members stand behind their pastor’s decision. “My pastor is my spiritual father, and [the statue] is his vision for the church, and I

trust in his direction," she says.

Vinson says Williams' messages are challenging. "Our church is not for the faint at heart," she says. "He's so frank, so in-your-face, if there's some conviction to be had, he's going to put it out there."

Raised in the Baptist church his father founded in 1944, Williams began exploring charismatic teaching in the mid-1980s, when his infant daughter was diagnosed with a chronic skin condition. "She would scratch until she bled, and that was almost every night," Williams says. "I started to get on my knees and ask God, 'Why?' and, 'What do I need to see my daughter receive healing?'"

While serving as pastor of the congregation he grew up in, Williams began to study Kenneth Hagin's books on spiritual authority and later attended Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma. After he graduated in 1989, Williams introduced his congregation to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

"Without challenging them, without trying to throw it down their throats, after four months I saw three-fourths of my congregation come forward to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit," he says.

Williams says his daughter is now completely healed, and the church has experienced unprecedented growth, drawing more than 3,000 each Sunday. In 1997 it was renamed World Overcomers Outreach Ministries Church (), and its full-scale, public bookstore makes available books written by both Williams and his wife, Elder Sherrilyn Williams, who is also a minister and

speaker.

Williams says his congregation is dedicated to reaching Hickory Hill, the middle-class neighborhood where the church and statue are located. World Overcomers purchased its distinctive dome-shaped building, which houses a 4,000-seat sanctuary, in 2001. Next door is a recreational facility that is open to the community.

Although he would not specify an amount, Williams says his church has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into the Memphis community through the years. The church is planning to purchase property to launch businesses that will help the Hickory Hill area develop economically while offering services that will strengthen individuals and families.

In 1999, apostle John Eckhardt of Crusaders Church in Chicago consecrated Williams an apostle, though he is not formally connected to Eckhardt's IMPACT apostolic network. Williams believes his call is to develop leaders within his congregation, people who will go out and minister in the community.

To date, the church has planted seven Bible studies across Memphis, including in workplaces, on a local college campus and at a senior citizens home. "We're beginning to take the church to the people rather than waiting for the people to come to church," he says. "The early church worshiped not only in the temple but also [from] house-to-house. There are some things the corporate setting cannot minister to. Through house churches, people are getting a chance to use their gifts."

A Christian Nation

Developing creative ways to spread the gospel is part of Williams' calling. So is speaking out about politically charged issues, though he doesn't consider that the primary focus of his ministry. "My calling brings about the out-of-the-box things you see," he says. "In the church world, we play it safe to keep members from leaving. We're afraid to take a stand."

But not Williams. He has spent thousands of dollars to purchase "advertorials" in the Memphis Commercial-Appeal to express Bible-based positions on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Williams published *Sweet Land of Liberty: The 'Why' Behind New Orleans*. In the book he makes the unpopular assertion that New Orleans fell into God's judgment because of the greatness of its sin, particularly idolatry.

He believes sin defiles the land and that God uses judgment to bring restoration. "The Bible is clear that when God desires to judge a nation He uses foreign enemy nations to bring it to its knees," Williams says. "If America does not return to its Judeo-Christian values, we will ... witness war on American soil, or more catastrophic events."

Some observers are wary of Williams' desire to see America become a "Christian nation." But historians say those concerns stem from misunderstandings about what it means for a nation to be Christian.

Some define a Christian nation as one led by a religious government that requires all citizens to observe Christianity. "And despite the fact that we've had over 350 court rulings calling America a Christian nation, we've never done any of that," Barton says. "Everywhere Christianity has appeared, it

has brought republican government with it. You cannot find theocracies established by Christianity.”

Others use demographics to determine a nation’s religious identity. But while a majority of Americans profess Christianity, that faith doesn’t always influence their lifestyles, says Peter Marshall, a Presbyterian minister who writes and teaches about America’s Christian heritage. “You have to start examining how much of our public policy is shaped by biblical values,” he says.

For Williams, “a Christian nation is one whose laws and institutions are consistent with the Word of God,” he says. In the last several years he has collected numerous quotes from historical figures that he says demonstrate Christianity’s influence on the nation’s founding leaders.

In his book *The Christian Liberty of Our Founding Fathers*, he quotes James McHenry, a signer of the Constitution and the nation’s third secretary of war, as saying: “The holy Scriptures ... can alone secure to society, order and peace, and to our courts of justice and constitutions of government, purity, stability and usefulness.”

Secularism has opposed that view, and Christian educators have complained that textbooks are being revised to de-emphasize the nation’s Christian heritage. The generations of students who have been presented a secularized view of history are now the nation’s political, academic and corporate leaders, Marshall notes.

“This is what has led to judicial tyranny, where judges are ... trying to strip all public expression in America of religious

values,” says Marshall, who with author David Manuel has written numerous best-selling books, including *The Light and the Glory* and *From Sea to Shining Sea*. “It’s not history for the sake of history. We need to get back America’s vision because we don’t know who we are as a nation.”

If the U.S. were to become a truly Christian nation, abortion eventually would be outlawed, “just as the Second Great Awakening ended slavery,” Marshall says. But that transformation would begin with a change in individuals’ hearts.

“We’d have to have a huge explosion of spiritual renewal and vitality in American life [to] radically change the moral values in our society,” he says. “True nationwide revival starts with personal salvation through Christ, which leads to social change.”

Williams hopes his imposing green statue will help bring about that kind of renewal.

Anahid Schweikert is a second generation Armenian American who says her visit to the Statue of Liberty in 1989 was a significant moment in her life. She is a frequent contributor to *Charisma* and lives near Memphis, Tennessee, with her husband and two daughters.

Memphis’ Symbol of Freedom

Apostle Alton R. Williams designed the Statue of Liberation to point onlookers to Christ

The Statue of Liberty overlooking the New York harbor has been a symbol of freedom for people of all walks of life,

regardless of ethnicity, social class, political view or religion. But when apostle Alton R. Williams built a "Christianized" remake of the statue on the property of his World Overcomers Outreach Ministries Church in Memphis, Tennessee, he hoped it would embody a different kind of liberty.

Rife with Christian symbolism, the Statue of Liberation Through Christ holds a golden cross instead of a flaming torch, and the tablet in her left hand is engraved with numbers representing the Ten Commandments rather than the Declaration of Independence. The seven spikes of her crown signify seven redemptive names of Christ instead of the Earth's seven continents.

The statue's robe represents a garment of salvation offered through Christ. Even the pedestal, which is hollow, speaks of Jesus' empty tomb and His resurrection. But the statue is as much a warning as an invitation. The troubling tear on her cheek symbolizes God's sorrow at America's dangerous departure from its biblical roots and morals.

Williams hopes the statue will draw visitors from across Memphis and beyond. The church is in the process of building a prayer room in the pedestal base and a gift shop and information center on the grounds that will help generate income to support the statue's upkeep.

But whether onlookers stop by and visit or just keep passing by, Williams says he hopes "Lady Liberation" will remind them of their need for a savior and of the freedom that can be found only in Christ.