

The Calm After the Storm

Having survived cancer, a nervous breakdown and Hurricane Katrina, Bishop Paul S. Morton is spreading a message of hope in New Orleans and across the nation.

Bishop Paul S. Morton leads churches in New Orleans and Atlanta, broadcasts nationally on radio and TV, and records award-winning gospel music. But his office in New Orleans' Uptown district remains remarkably humble.

A narrow hallway with old, linoleum floors leads to a room where Morton's disarming smile and voice are the finest features. Except for the crisp black suit and gold tie he wears, Morton seems more like an accessible father than a major ministry personality. "Christ gets all the glory [for the ministry's influence]," he says with conviction.

It is conviction born from recent years of trial.

In 1998, Morton suffered a nervous breakdown after he made some financial decisions for his church that he admits were poor. In 2005, his then-20,000-strong New Orleans congregation was smashed by Hurricane Katrina and scattered to cities across the South. The following year he was diagnosed with colon cancer that is now in remission. Morton, 57, quickly says God carried him through it all.

"It makes me feel proud just to see how God is using Bishop Morton to touch and change lives of people," says his executive assistant of 14 years, Jan Breaux. "As much as God uses him, he becomes more humble."

His humility registers in the soulful pleas Morton issues through his music. In 2003 he released *Let It Rain*, a powerful cry to be filled with the Holy Spirit's power. Then in 2006, after his struggles with Hurricane Katrina, cancer and mental illness, he returned to New Orleans, giving God glory in a new CD, *Still Standing*.

He believes God has him right where He wants him. After more than 40 years in ministry, Morton now feels called to be “a sign to the nation,” offering to America the very “message of hope” he preaches to his New Orleans church. The road, however, has been challenging.

Bapticostal Power

Morton grew up in Windsor, Ontario, the son of a popular Pentecostal pastor who preached widely in Canada and in nearby Detroit. But despite his father’s church and the ministry relationships he had been forming since he began preaching at age 16, Morton sensed God telling him, “Leave and come to New Orleans.”

“It did not seem to make sense,” Morton says in reflection. “I asked the Lord—‘Why would You send me to the South, where I know nobody?’”

Although he was reared in the Church of God in Christ, Morton says God led him to visit Greater St. Stephen Missionary Baptist Church in New Orleans’ Uptown district. Six months later, he became assistant pastor, drawn to St. Stephen’s Baptist emphasis on salvation and the Word. In 1975, the church’s senior pastor died, and Morton, at 24, was tapped as successor. He later married the pastor’s daughter, Debra.

The church saw many conversions leading to exponential growth. Christopher Sylvain, a former nightclub musician, became a Christian through Morton’s ministry. “I was fascinated with the bishop,” says Sylvain, now Morton’s first assistant pastor. “I’ve always just been fascinated by his desire to be closer to God.”

While partying one night on Bourbon Street, another young man heard the Holy Spirit tell him, “Go to church.” During an altar call at St. Stephen, Avery Johnson accepted Christ. “I had considered myself a Christian, but I wasn’t,” Johnson says. “That day, I changed dance partners.”

Today Johnson, who hit the winning shot for the San Antonio Spurs when they won the 1999 NBA championship, is the head coach for the Dallas Mavericks. "I have tried to be a good example of what a man of God is," Johnson told Charisma. "Whether it has been witnessing, the way I play, the way I prepare or the way I forgive somebody, I try to be a good example."

As Morton's first church began to swell, he never stopped operating in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He finally accepted the fact that he "knew too much about the Holy Ghost to ignore it." So in 1992 he changed the church's name to Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church.

He convened top church leaders—including Kenneth Ulmer of Faithful Central Bible Church in Los Angeles and Eddie Long of what was then New Birth Baptist Church in Atlanta—to found the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, seeking to meld the best of the black Baptist and Pentecostal traditions.

With Morton as presiding bishop, the fellowship held its first national conference in 1994, when 25,000 descended on the Louisiana Superdome. Today the fellowship has more than 5,000 affiliates worldwide, though several of its founding leaders, including Ulmer and Long, are now independent of the group.

Meanwhile, St. Stephen's ministry in New Orleans kept expanding. In 1997 it purchased a military base and renamed it St. Stephen City. It provided affordable housing to needy families. St. Stephen Manor opened near Morton's Uptown church to house about 50 families.

Morton bought an office building to serve as headquarters for community-related efforts and the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship's national headquarters. By the late 1990s, Greater St. Stephen had grown to more than 20,000. Morton was named an honorary city council member and was included in many key New Orleans leadership efforts. But despite his busy schedule, he

remained committed to his church.

One Church, Two Cities

Morton has always kept a busy work schedule. "Tomorrow, we go in and take care of office business in Atlanta," Morton says as he waits for a plane in New Orleans.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, Morton and his wife planted a second church, Changing a Generation Full Gospel Baptist Church, in Atlanta. "I prepare to lead a Bible study in Atlanta on Thursday, and we also have a Bible study in New Orleans that either my wife or I lead," Morton says. "Most often, I am out preaching Friday somewhere around the United States."

There was a time when Morton made 65-plus trips a year to speaking and singing engagements—plus caring for his church. "And there are only 52 weeks in a year," laughs Brandon Boutin, 27, who is an elder at Greater St. Stephen church.

But when Morton suffered from a nervous breakdown in 1998—an episode he speaks candidly about—he says God showed him he needed to slow down and make quality time for refreshment and family. Today Morton seeks to model a more balanced lifestyle.

"He is very kind, sensitive, forgiving," Sylvain says. "And he lives it with his family so you can see it through his family."

With his wife of 31 years, Morton has raised three children to adulthood. All now are actively involved in ministry. And he has mentored many spiritual children who now work alongside him.

"Bishop Morton is a father," Boutin says. "He's an honorable man of integrity. He speaks truth to power; he's very caring. He is definitely a role model, and a man that believes in striving for excellence."

These days, Morton often rises at 3 a.m. to pray; after a few hours he takes a quick power nap. "It's just me and the Lord, no phone ringing," he says. "I have to have that quiet time."

When Hurricane Katrina hit on August 29, 2005, wiping out virtually all of Greater St. Stephen's New Orleans facilities except for the original Uptown church building, God again used catastrophe to bring Morton into a new place of ministry.

Morton was in Baltimore when the storm passed through. Weeks later, when he finally was able to enter New Orleans, his members had been scattered to Houston; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Atlanta; and other cities.

He dove right into rebuilding efforts, helping lead a coalition of pastors. The city looked to him for strategic organization of the thousands affiliated with his ministry.

But today Morton is unsatisfied with the rebuilding effort. "It is still going too slow for me," he says. "When you look at the Ninth Ward in east New Orleans ... it still seems like a Third World country."

There is way too much red tape, he says. Just getting a building permit takes months. So does accessing federal and state funds. The problem is "definitely politics," he says. "Now the past governor is out and a new governor is in. We are giving time to see if the problem gets better.

"We are really trying to get to the bottom of it. We're really sick of all the excuses. Let's just recover."

Morton says the hurricane exposed public corruption in the city; it showed the ugly realities of the city's deep sin problems. And it exposed latent racism, he says, something he believes remains not only in New Orleans but also throughout the nation.

"I think that we have come a long way concerning race in our

nation,” he says. “Never in my lifetime did I think our white brothers and sisters might support a black man like Barack Obama for president as they have.

“We have come a long way there. But we have to learn how to appreciate each other. It’s still a problem in the church. This generation is really tired of it.

“It’s not just on the white side. ... We have to realize that there are some intelligent, gifted people on both sides [of the racial divide], and we need to be united.”

Giving the Holy Spirit Control

Such candor about tough issues is a trademark of Morton’s. He never shies from speaking his mind. For instance, when the Congressional Black Caucus signaled support for gay marriage, Morton went to Washington, D.C., to take them to task.

And when a 13-year-old black youth was arrested and charged spuriously with murder last year in New Orleans, Morton challenged justice officials via the media, asking if race influenced the charges.

Morton is also willing to scrutinize himself on the hard issues. Recently he shifted his views about women in ministry, which he had opposed. He did more than talk. In May, he made Debra the senior pastor of Greater St. Stephen in New Orleans, lowering himself to the role of co-pastor. He remains senior pastor in Atlanta, with Debra as co-pastor.

“When I was young, I was big on having Debra stay at home and not work and raise a family,” he explains, chuckling. “I was very old-fashioned then—young, but old-fashioned.”

Sylvain calls it “a living illustration of all [Morton’s] theology.”

“Elder Debra has the authority; Bishop Morton doesn’t hover over,” Sylvain says. “This shows the Pentecostal and Baptist

churches that the Spirit has control and can speak through whom He would speak through. It recognizes the power of the Spirit.”

These days, Morton also is emphasizing the importance of biblical balance. “We teach prosperity in our churches, but ... we also preach about getting saved, too,” he says.

He believes his stepping down as senior pastor in New Orleans models a balanced view of men’s and women’s roles. He swells with enthusiasm when he speaks of his wife’s advancement in ministry.

“For her to come in and initially serve as ‘first lady’ in our church, then head up our ministries in New Orleans, then in 1993 become my co-pastor and now become my senior pastor in New Orleans—that’s wonderful. I am so proud of her when I see her preach. She gets everything she possibly can out of a passage of Scripture.

“She takes people very seriously. She is a lover of people. That’s important.”

After Hurricane Katrina struck, Morton had considered starting a new church in Houston, where many of his people were. But he says God directed him to plant the congregation in Atlanta. It did not seem altogether rational, much like when God first told him to move to New Orleans in his youth.

Morton started the Atlanta church with 220 people, and he says God immediately began blessing the congregation. Playwright and film producer Tyler Perry, a former St. Stephen member, gave the Atlanta church \$5 million to help get it started. Based in Atlanta himself, Perry is helping build a major new campus for the church’s ministries and plans to put his new movie studio there. “It’s going to be like Hollywood in Atlanta,” Morton says, noting that today the church draws 6,000.

Morton believes his church complements, rather than competes, with other "great churches in Atlanta," such as Creflo Dollar's World Changers ministry and Eddie Long's New Birth Cathedral. Morton says he leads "one church in two cities." The two-city congregation has adopted a theme: "Changing the way we do church."

"We can't be cliquish," Morton says. "We can't just praise the Lord while we are in church—we have to go outside the church."

Again, Morton emphasizes balance. There has to be balance between praise and worship and preaching salvation and repentance, he says. Concerned about many who seem to be straying from the faith into spurious teachings, Morton wants to preach this message of balance to as many as possible.

"The devil is taking the most powerful and influential people and using them around the nation to lead people astray," he says. "Look at Oprah Winfrey. Go to the Internet and see the message she's telling people. We have to break yokes and tell people to dare to believe again. People are searching, and Jesus is the only way."

Meanwhile, Greater St. Stephen stays firmly planted in New Orleans' struggling, crime-ridden Uptown neighborhood. Twisted concrete and hurricane debris linger everywhere.

But Paul and Debra Morton are not put off at all. They remain as committed as ever to their New Orleans body. Its outreach ministries have dropped by necessity from more than 60 to about 15, but the key ones continue—ministry to drug addicts, to the homeless, to senior citizens in need of housing.

A sign outside the Uptown church building proclaims to New Orleans that it can still count on the Mortons. They are "repositioning" their ministry efforts, the sign says, not retiring them. After all, Morton says smiling, "Jesus stayed on earth 33 years, then He repositioned."

Joe Maxwell is journalist-in-residence and adjunct professor of communications at Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi. **ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:** Go to to find more organizations still helping to rebuild New Orleans.