

The Church That Changed a City

Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin's growing congregation in Jacksonville, Florida, is reshaping the spiritual, social and economic landscape of a community.

Church elder Donald Foy has a gleam in his eye, a passion in his voice that lets a stranger know he has finally found his niche. A former drug addict and nine-time convicted felon, 54-year-old Foy is now a licensed clinical pastoral counselor at the same jail where he once was incarcerated. A big man with kind eyes, Foy has a simple message: The past doesn't have to dictate the future.

He's living proof.

Attorney Regenia Williams has the same glow. Once content with being a stay-at-home mom, Williams sensed God calling her to "phase two" of her life and ministry. She returned to college at age 30, with a first-grader and 4-year-old in tow, and eventually became a lawyer. Now her 41-year-old brow furrows with the fatigue of being a working mom. But she says it's all worth it when she prepares a free will for a poor, elderly person.

Williams was terrified to go back to college—until she realized that the Lord was sending her and that He would be going, too.

Bank CEO William Lawrence gives her a hearty amen. Once a naval instructor, Lawrence spent nearly 10 years learning how to charter a credit union, earning an additional degree in

financial services along the way. Now that his “baby” is up and running, Lawrence sees nothing but possibilities.

One day, he says, his mostly African American church family can be debt-free with the help of low-interest loans to pay off credit cards. They can drive luxury cars purchased in full with money invested in their savings accounts. Perhaps the younger generation can learn how to avoid their parents’ mistakes altogether.

Lawrence says he never wanted to be less than he could be. That meant taking his gift for teaching far beyond the navy base.

For Foy, Williams and Lawrence, the catalyst for change came from their church, the Potter’s House Christian Fellowship in Jacksonville, Florida. Their charismatic pastor, Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin, says the congregation is simply a bunch of cracked pots—former drug addicts, prostitutes and felons—that the Potter has put back together again. But they’re turning their city inside out using an innovative approach to economic empowerment—a ministry strategy that is growing increasingly popular among African American churches.

With capital raised from tithes and offerings, the church in 1997 opened its Potter’s House Multiplex, a 42,000-square-foot former bank building that now houses 21 businesses, including a Greyhound bus terminal, financial planning service, law practice and recording studio that has produced projects for dcTalk, jazz duo Allen & Allen, and rappers Petidee and GRITS.

Providing office space virtually rent-free, the multiplex has served as an incubator for entrepreneurs within the church and

broader community. The Potter's House covers all overhead costs; the tenants give back to the ministry as their businesses prosper, never fearing eviction.

One of McLaughlin's personal investments, the McLaughlin Building, offers the same opportunity to 14 additional businesses. The 3,000-member church also runs the Potter's House Federal Credit Union and a Christian academy for 500 students from grades kindergarten through ninth. Tuition is \$175 a month, with the church underwriting the remaining \$50,000 in annual costs. McLaughlin hopes to accommodate 3,000 students one day—tuition-free.

The bishop, 44, admits that he has a gift for giving, but he is convinced that all churches should be impacting their communities holistically—spiritually, economically and socially. Though there has been much talk about federal funding for faith-based organizations that provide social services and community development—a bill that passed in the House of Representatives in July—McLaughlin encourages ministers not to wait on the government to revitalize their cities. The tools for transformation are “in the house,” he says.

“I don't have to wait on the government to peel me off some funds to impact my community,” says McLaughlin, whose annual budget exceeds \$5 million. “We can work within the system by using the principles of God's kingdom. That's what Jesus told us.”

McLaughlin takes Jesus' command in Luke 19:13 to “occupy until He comes” quite literally. He says “occupy” means to barter, or to do business. He encourages ministries to synergize, or pool their resources, so the “sum of the individual parts

equals more than the individual parts by themselves.”

The strategy seems to be working in west Jacksonville. Though McLaughlin isn't willing to acknowledge a cause-and-effect relationship, he notes that when the church moved to the area in 1988, there was little development—“no McDonald's, no nothing.” Now several national chains have moved in, he says, and his property's value has tripled.

He figures only God could bring such change in his community. After all, he's just another one of those cracked pots reassembled in the Master's hands.

Living in the Real World

It's a typical Saturday in May, and the Potter's House Multiplex is abuzz with activity. Church members offer free auto repair outside as proprietors man their shops. Patrons unaffiliated with the ministry occasionally wander in and out, but more frequently church members stop by to get a haircut, grab a soda or just chat for a while in the café.

McLaughlin is among them, munching on a hamburger and greeting passers-by with a “Whassup!” and a smile. He says he always envisioned doing ministry like this—reaching the “total man.” But 20 years ago McLaughlin seemed an unlikely candidate for a ministry of any kind.

Raised mostly unchurched, McLaughlin took the road frequently traveled, drinking and partying in his youth. His mother, Elise Morgan, says he was always compassionate, but she thought he might become a doctor, not a pastor. McLaughlin graduated from high school at age 17, went to college on

athletic scholarships, married in 1978 and got a job working for the railroad in Jacksonville.

Then in 1982, an old college buddy returned to the area to play football for a local team. "He was carrying a playbook and a Bible under his arm," McLaughlin says. "The first thing he said to me was, 'The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.'"

When the team later folded, Alvin Smalls moved in with McLaughlin and his wife, Narlene, for several months. The couple observed the consistency of his Christian witness, though they tried to help him fall a couple of times. But the words their friend had spoken didn't return void. One Tuesday morning, McLaughlin says, Romans 6:23 drifted into his thoughts: "The wages of sin is death."

"I looked up to heaven and said, 'God, if You're real, save me,'" McLaughlin recalls.

Experiencing a radical transformation, 25-year-old McLaughlin quickly became as fervent as his friend. After Narlene accepted Christ several months later, the couple voraciously devoured Scripture—experiencing the baptism in the Holy Spirit in their home and learning about the things of God on their own.

Young and zealous, the couple began attending the Baptist church where McLaughlin's mother was active in ministry. Observing an unusual preaching ability in the young minister—who was preaching "to anybody who would get in my way"—church leaders elevated him quickly. Seven months after his conversion, he was offered a pastoral position at

another church.

"I knew better than that," McLaughlin says. "A pastor can't be a novice. But I was a preacher, sort of a prodigy."

Yet his charisma made him unpopular with his pastor, who called McLaughlin into his office one day and gave him an ultimatum: "'One of us is going to have to go, and it ain't gonna be me,'" McLaughlin recalls.

"He basically said that our philosophies were different, that he's Baptist, and some of my hand lifting, some of the spiritual-gifts teaching that I was not appropriate for his church and that it would be better for me to leave. So I'm thinking this is a promotion; I'm so young. My wife and I are like, 'Yeah!'"

Though the pastor removed McLaughlin's ministerial license, within a year he became an evangelism pastor at another Baptist church. Three years later, the fervent 30-year-old became senior pastor of a 125-year-old rural Baptist church with a handful of elderly members.

"We had a great revival," he says. "We went from that couple of people to about 300 folks."

But McLaughlin knew he wouldn't be there long. He had always felt called to pastor an urban church. After 10 months, he began to sense a tug to move in a new direction.

It was May 1988, and McLaughlin went to an Azusa Fellowship conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to clear his head. In the

prayer tower at Oral Roberts

University, McLaughlin says God revealed to him the vision for the Potter's House. A week later, he resigned from his church.

"God showed me the need for holistic ministry in the church—total man, social, economic. Everything we see today that's manifested in the ministry, I literally wrote it on the first meeting of the church, I read it. All of these things that are happening right now, I literally said it.

"I remember saying that in a year's time, this building won't hold us. And whether they wanted to believe it or not, that's what happened."

The church packed out, eventually purchasing their leased facility and quickly outgrowing it. Some Sundays they tried to cram 500 people into a 350-seat auditorium. "Those were the good days," he says. "We literally saw a move of God, because I didn't have a clue what I was doing."

Breaking Tradition

McLaughlin knew, however, that he didn't want his church to bear the trappings of tradition. He didn't make a production of the announcements; there was no choir, no congregational reading. He says in his years as a denominational pastor he learned "a whole lot of what not to do." Instead, he focused his attention on evangelism, and by 1999 they were turning away 200 to 300 people each week from an 800-seat auditorium.

To quickly accommodate his growing congregation, McLaughlin postponed his plans to build a larger facility and erected a \$650,000 tentlike structure that seats 2,200. A building

project would have taken two years, this “instant” building—where the congregation now meets—was completed in less than four months.

As McLaughlin continued to share his vision, church members seemed to fall into place, he says. A 30-year-old housewife named Regenia Williams told him she wanted to be his lawyer. His longtime friend, William Lawrence, began researching credit unions. Ex-offender Donald Foy said he felt called to be a Christian counselor—and the Potter’s House paid for his training.

McLaughlin also continued his education, earning two master’s degrees and a doctorate. His wife, Narlene, earned a master’s degree in education—spending two summers away from her family—to lead the Potter’s House Christian Academy. A skillful Bible teacher, she also leads the women’s ministry and is the church’s administrator.

“The vision kind of gives people direction and snowballs,” McLaughlin says. “Once you say it, you’re saying it to hearts, and that word goes into soil, and then they’ve got to determine whether to act. And then if they have a relationship with the Lord, the Lord will speak to them and tell them, ‘OK, this is what you’ve got to do.’”

A leader without a mentor of his own, McLaughlin says he always has been solely reliant on the Holy Spirit for direction. “I’ve always been interdependent upon other pastors,” he says, “but I’ve never been just totally dependent on them. I was always so dependent on God. So whenever I came back and said to anybody in the church, ‘This is what I believe God wants us to do’...they had to trust the fact that I can hear God.”

The congregation demonstrated that confidence when McLaughlin told them he wanted to convert part of the bank building the church purchased as an administrative facility into a commercial center that would meet the community's needs. "There were basic things we knew we needed to have—bookstore, café, barber shop, game room," he says. "The other things came up as other people who owned their own businesses needed a commercial space.

"But our whole purpose was not even for them. We were thinking [of] the community. How can we get the community serviced and into this facility to hear the gospel? That was the whole purpose of the multiplex. Our goal was to transform this community."

Making a Difference

The church's efforts have gotten the local media's attention as well as support from the mayor and city council. "[The Potter's House] is such a beacon of light on our west side," councilwoman Alberta Hipps told Charisma. "Although the church is not in my district, I have been so impressed with his ministry."

Hipps worked with McLaughlin to help fund the Back to the Blacktop basketball project that would provide a recreational outlet for youth in the city. When the bishop shared his vision for the project, she caught it.

"He is absolutely unique," Hipps says. "There are some people who do the work; they are transactional people. He is the kind of person who is transformational when he touches lives."

Appointed a bishop in 1999 through the independent Covenant Ecumenical Fellowship and Cathedral Assemblies, McLaughlin hopes to show other pastors how to transform their communities, too. He oversees more than 300 pastors in his Covenant Fellowship International, including 200 in Latin America.

"I spend a lot of time with these people in workshops three or four times a year, equipping them, doing complete structure workshops and helping them—everything from preaching right down to the parking attendants," McLaughlin says. "So they're able to bring their here trained to go back and implement this, curtailed to their style in their community."

Pastor Randy White of Without Walls International Church in Tampa, Florida, gleaned from McLaughlin's insights to develop the empowerment aspect of his own ministry. White describes the Potter's House as "the 21st-century church," adding that McLaughlin "was one of the few people who were doing what the church is supposed to be doing."

Members of the ethnically diverse fellowship describe McLaughlin as a spiritual father who has gone out on a limb to lead them. Kyle Harrison, pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Starke, Florida, was a worship leader when he met McLaughlin. Now he is pastoring the only multiethnic congregation within three counties of his church.

Harrison, who is white, says McLaughlin has mentored him and even paid his debts. "This man who I call my bishop, if it weren't improper, I'd call him father," Harrison says.

Pastor Derek Calhoun of New Vision International Ministries in

Norwalk, Connecticut, sought McLaughlin's counsel when he decided to leave his denominational church to plant an independent charismatic ministry. McLaughlin flew to Connecticut to help him plan the inaugural service and even purchased needed equipment.

McLaughlin still gives to New Vision every month, and the 300-member church has become a smaller Potter's House, supporting a Christian bookstore started by one of its members and sending eight people to culinary arts school to assist another member in a catering startup.

McLaughlin's plans for the Potter's House are far from complete. The church recently purchased a 26-acre facility to house the school, and they're breaking ground on a 3,500-seat sanctuary. Yet the proof of this ministry's effectiveness is not in its buildings, but in its people.

Pastor Jose Ureña was an alcoholic when he met Bishop McLaughlin in 1991. In fact, he was drunk when he first came to a service.

But he gave his life to Christ, and McLaughlin took him under his wing, discipling him and even sending him to college to study computer science. Ureña later became an elder and head of the Potter's House Spanish ministry.

Observers may marvel at the church's community impact, but to Ureña, the ministry's hallmark is its sincere love. "I have a love for people," he says. "It was planted there by the bishop because of the way he loved me."

Dayton's Faith-Based Initiative

Revival Center Ministries' community work is funded almost entirely by the government.

Bishop Marva Mitchell has a saying: "The wealth of the wicked is laid up for the just, but there are some forms you have to fill out." She says the government pays most of her bills—which exceed \$1 million—thanks to some skillful grant writers and a Pentecostal congregation that knows how to bring results.

Mitchell's 1,000-member Revival Center Ministries International in Dayton, Ohio, received a national award for its efforts to prevent truancy and substance abuse. Last year, the juvenile court system asked for their help rehabilitating delinquent girls.

Though a massive stroke in 1993 left her paralyzed on her left side, Mitchell is influencing legislation in the city council and calling a summit to get churches more involved in their local schools.

The owner of two businesses, Mitchell is keen on economic empowerment. Instead of teaching people how to fish, she says, "We teach them how to buy the pond."

Her goal is simply to change lives—with or without federal funding. She says community transformation has been part of Revival Center's vision since she and her late husband founded the church 13 years ago.

"We started off when we were 200 small," Mitchell told Charisma. "We worked with the schools for over five years

before they gave us any money.”

In the ministry’s early days, the church sponsored a Love School program to evangelize inner-city youth. But soon Mitchell realized that many of the children didn’t eat on Saturdays because they weren’t in school to receive the free lunches for low-income families.

The church began feeding the children, then teaching them to read as they discovered that many had poor reading skills. The effectiveness of their literacy program got the United Way’s attention, which gave the program a \$35,000 grant.

“There has never been a line between church and state,” Mitchell insists. Many ministries simply don’t know how to tap into the funds available, she says.

She noticed that the Catholic Church received federal funding for their Catholic Social Services and Catholic Charities. Revival Center established its own nonprofit arm, Project Impact, and professionals within her congregation began showing Mitchell how to write grants. Now, she says, the government pays most of Project Impact’s \$1.5 million budget.

Author of *It Takes a Church to Raise a Village* (Destiny Image), Mitchell—who oversees more than 20 churches internationally through her God’s Will Fellowship—hopes to inspire other congregations to impact their cities. She encourages suburban churches to partner with urban ministries, financially if not socially.

Mother of seven and a breast cancer survivor, Mitchell is a “no excuses” kind of leader. She believes the new millennium

brings the greatest opportunity for churches to impact their “villages” since the writing of the book of Acts.

“The Church possesses the wisdom and power to raise the village and set a new course for the future,” she writes. “...Our tools for renovation are the love of Christ, the truth of the gospel, and the power of the Spirit. This is our day to raise the village. It’s time to die to ourselves that others might be raised up in newness of life.”

Houston’s Power Center

Windsor Village is showing the nation that faith plus works can change a community.

The Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell shocked many African Americans when he introduced then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush at the 2000 Republican National Convention. Though most African Americans vote Democratic, the business savvy pastor of Houston’s 13,400-member Windsor Village United Methodist Church seemed convinced that Bush and his faith-based initiative could empower the urban poor.

Caldwell, an Independent who has known Bush for about six years, says he wasn’t trying to be a political pundit. He just knows how much one church can do.

Windsor Village’s 104,000-square-foot Power Center houses a Christian academy, Chase Bank of Texas branch, a business and technology school, the University of Texas-Hermann Hospital Clinic and an office for the federal Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program. Beyond its empowerment services, the center has created 276 jobs and generates \$14.4

million annually.

“Improving the lives of folk in the community has always been a hallmark of [Windsor Village],” says Caldwell, who has been charismatic for 12 years. “I believe the same God who saves the souls of individuals wants to save the souls of communities.”

A former investment banker, Caldwell, 48, became pastor of Windsor Village in 1982. The church had only 25 members, and Caldwell says his first goal was to teach his congregation to take their Christian witness outside the church.

“The life of Jesus should drive our personal lives. The life of the kingdom should drive our professional lives,” he says.

That ethos motivated the congregation to impact their community with “relevant multiple ministries.” They set up a school, founded a children’s shelter and developed low-income housing. Then in 1992, a new ministry opportunity fell into Caldwell’s lap when Fiesta Mart Inc. gave the ministry an abandoned Kmart building.

Using a unique fund-raising strategy, the church raised \$2.3 million for the \$4.2 million renovations by issuing bonds sold nationally. They loaned that amount, along with \$657,000 in contributions and a \$1 million foundation grant, to their nonprofit arm, Pyramid CDC, which oversees the center.

The innovative approach caught the attention of national media such as the Wall Street Journal, U.S. News & World Report and NBC Nightly News. In 1997, Newsweek named Caldwell one of the 100 people to watch in the new millennium. And in 1999, he

wrote *The Gospel of Good Success* (Simon & Schuster), which maps the road to “holistic salvation.”

Another ministry opportunity seemed to fall into Caldwell’s lap in 1997 when the church purchased 234 acres of land though shopping for only 25. Because Caldwell “always had a vision to help people own land,” the property houses a residential area known as Corinthian Pointe. The \$82 million development includes 125 single family homes, and will later house 325 additional units, as well as a retirement community, health complex and 24-hour prayer center similar to the World Prayer Center in Colorado.

Though a longtime supporter of faith-based initiatives, Caldwell doesn’t think all churches are called to community development. Yet he believes Windsor Village was birthed to show Houston the transformative power of God.

“Jesus Christ is the hope of all the world,” Caldwell says. “We don’t just sing about it, preach about it, but we do something about it. We take the ministry to the streets.”

Out to Transform Hollywood

Faithful Central Bible Church is reaching Los Angeles with family-friendly entertainment.

Mixing faith with finance isn’t a new concept for Faithful Central Bible Church in Los Angeles. But this time last year, the ministry was in the throes of what may have been the biggest step of faith in its history.

That's when the 11,000-member congregation set out to purchase the Great Western Forum, former home of the Los Angeles Lakers, for a cool \$22.5 million. Before the venue became available, the church was planning to build another facility to accommodate its growing crowd—an \$18 million venture that would seat

5,000. But its pastor, Bishop Kenneth Ulmer, says the December purchase killed another bird with the same stone.

"We believe there's a very particular, very specific call on this reach out and have an impact on the entertainment community," Ulmer told Charisma. "We don't believe we're in this city by accident, but that God has called us here to be light in what, for the most part, is an area of darkness."

Currently, the venue is still the home of the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks and the ABA's Los Angeles Stars, and the facility frequently hosts concerts and other entertainment events. Both a for-profit venture and ministry tool, the Forum will maintain a family-friendly orientation, Ulmer says.

Disney on Ice, the Harlem Globetrotters and Sesame Street recently performed there. Groups that are sexually explicit or otherwise offensive will not be allowed, he says.

This unusual marriage of Christianity and entertainment is bound to bring some criticism, Ulmer acknowledges. But he says Faithful Central is called "to be very deliberately involved in the fabric of our community," and he is determined to reach his city "by any means necessary."

"I think [the church has] tried ministry into a box. And every time you do that, you're going to miss somebody," Ulmer says.

“I don’t think it’s a matter of think it’s a matter of fleshing out and being the incarnation of the principle that Paul presents about diversity in unity [see 1 Cor. 12] on one hand and about being all things to all people on the other [see 1 Cor. 9:22].”

Though there are no altar calls at most events (church services also are held in the 17,500-seat arena), Ulmer says less overt ministry opportunities still exist. For example, when Madonna rehearsed at the Forum—“She didn’t do a performance here; she [only] rehearsed here,” he notes—Ulmer sent her children a basket filled with children’s books along with a note that the church was praying for her.

“She said they had never been anywhere where somebody said, ‘We’re praying for you,’” he says. “So it’s that level [of ministry].”

Consecrated a bishop in the Full Gospel Baptist Church, Ulmer resigned from the organization two years ago and now oversees 75 pastors in his Macedonia International Bible Fellowship based in South Africa. Ulmer says he hopes the fellowship will inspire and encourage pastors to be more effective for the kingdom in their own local settings.

He knows Faithful Central’s model won’t work in other U.S. cities, much less halfway around the world. Yet he believes any ministry can identify its purpose, catch God’s vision for the church and run with it. But he warns, it may require taking “church” out of the box.

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