

# McKinney Starts Urban Ministry Center

**American Urban University in San Diego is training a new breed of missionaries for inner cities**

As inner-city crime rates, drug activity and family breakdown worsen, a California minister is seeking to confront the problems from within. Through his American Urban University (AUU), Bishop George McKinney, Ph.D., pastor of St. Stephen's Church of God in Christ in San Diego, hopes to prepare "urban missionaries" who feel called to work in inner-city schools, law enforcement agencies and other public services.

"Our aim, and it's a conscious and intentional effort, is to train teachers, social workers, police officers, public servants who have a sense of a calling," said McKinney, 69. "Not being trained to escape the neighborhood, but being trained to come and give back to the community and to be agents of transformation in our community."

As a first step, the school in June 2001 began offering theological training in its C.H. Mason School of Ministry for those wanting to serve in full-time ministry. Within five years, AUU Executive Vice President Leon Wood expects the school to be fully functioning as a Christian liberal arts university, complete with opportunities for distance learning.

Licensed by the California Post-Secondary Commission, AUU will offer bachelor's and master's degrees to students who enter with at least 60 credit hours. A former community college dean and pastor of an inner-city church, Wood says the accreditation process will likely begin in 2005.

“It takes a certain type of teacher, a teacher with a faith-based understanding, to cope with the challenges that are facing them [in inner-city schools],” Wood said. “That is also true for those dealing in the social services, in the field of law and those who are in the midst of hardships in the inner city.”

Wood added: “If we can develop an educational system that who graduate from our programs will be able to attack some of these social situations in a much different way.”

Simply put, equipping teachers, social workers, nursing home staff and others for the unique spiritual and practical challenges of the inner city will make such services more effective. “I think everyone would grow, and it would probably reduce your crime,” Wood said. “You’d probably see less folks walking down the street homeless and suffering because there’d be a change mentally.”

McKinney’s commitment to reclaiming America’s inner cities for God has long marked his ministry. St. Stephen’s operates a school, counseling center, retirement facility, and AIDS and prison ministries. The church even purchased a housing project to weed out drug activity and make the community safer and more stable.

Now McKinney’s attention is fixed on preparing current and emerging leaders to make an even greater mark on urban communities by fusing theological with practical training. A survey he conducted in 1986 upon becoming bishop of COGIC’s Southern California Second Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction revealed that less than 5 percent of pastors under his

leadership had any formal ministry training.

“It’s not enough for me to talk about how sad it is that many of my colleagues did not have training,” said McKinney, who has earned both master’s and doctoral degrees in theology and is a licensed marriage and family counselor. “It’s better to light a candle and provide training for them.”

W.P. Middlebrooks, 32, has been attending classes at AUU for a year in pursuit of a master’s degree. “AUU is a realistic approach to urban ministry,” says Middlebrooks, who founded Youth United for the World and is in the process of starting an urban church. “Most schools [offer] some theological training, but it kind of stops there. A lot of people [experience] a culture shock when [they] actually do ministry.”

Middlebrooks said he hopes to one day lead a ministry that empowers people who are “cracked out, smoked out...[and] on welfare” to change their reality.

“The majority of the instructors are actively pastoring in the ghetto,” he said, “so they’re able to give firsthand knowledge, realistic insight into what’s happening... and what you’ll end up dealing with and what spiritual war in these communities is about.”

McKinney hopes Christians won’t leave inner-city ministries to fight those battles alone. Though he acknowledges that one must be called to urban ministry, he says many people don’t realize how much they can do.

He encourages those with even a little concern for the inner

city to consider supporting an urban church; participating in feeding programs and outreaches to the homeless, AIDS patients and prisoners; or volunteering with church-run schools, tutoring programs and retirement centers. Those seeking a deeper commitment can oversee such ministries or offer counseling in parenting, finance and other life skills.

With roughly 100 students at campuses in San Diego, Phoenix, Los Angeles and Riverside, Calif., AUU is poised for growth. McKinney acknowledges that the challenge of drugs, crime, AIDS and broken homes is severe.

But he thinks of the people God would never abandon. There's Tanya, the 14-year-old mother who superglued her baby's eyes and mouth closed to keep him from crying and disturbing her mother. And there's Katherine, whose 12-year-old son was killed in the crossfire between rival gangs while walking home from school.

In his book, *Cross the Line* (Thomas Nelson), McKinney gently challenges the body of Christ: "Let the love of Christ motivate you. Focus that love toward the millions of lost and dying in the inner city. Pick up your cross and carry it to the wall. Cross the line in Jesus' name."

**Adrienne S. Gaines**

---

For more information about American Urban University, contact Modiera West Public Relations and Publicity at (510) 663-3390; or visit their Web site at [www.aau.edu](#); or e-mail [modierawestprp@auu.edu](mailto:modierawestprp@auu.edu).

---