

No Excuses!

After surviving cancer, a stroke and the death of her husband, Bishop Marva Mitchell believes God has raised her up to take the excuses out of the body of Christ.

Bishop Marva Mitchell is a “no excuses” kind of leader. In 1988, when she realized local children weren’t eating on Saturdays because they weren’t in school to receive free lunches, she fed them. And when she discovered that these same children couldn’t read proficiently, she taught them.

In the last 14 years, the church she pastors, Revival Center Ministries International in Dayton, Ohio, has won numerous awards for its truancy prevention and substance abuse programs. This year the governor of Ohio appointed Marva to his task force for faith-based initiatives, and she became chairwoman of Dayton’s faith-based committee. Marva also travels the world training pastors and teaching churches how to become more involved in their local communities.

Surprisingly, the 54-year-old does all this relying heavily on a cane or wheelchair. A massive stroke in 1993 left her completely paralyzed on her left side. Doctors thought she wouldn’t live another 24 hours. If she did, she’d be a vegetable, they said, and if for some reason she wasn’t comatose, she’d certainly never walk.

They were wrong on all counts. Even though she can use only her right hand and has limited vision in her left eye, her condition hasn’t slowed her down in her work for the Lord.

“I believe God raised me up to take all the excuses out of today’s church body,” says Marva, who is also a breast cancer survivor. “If I can get around, and I’m still considered physically challenged or handicapped, if I can do what I do, nobody else has any excuse.”

A CALL TO PREACH

Raised by her aunt and an uncle who was a pastor, Marva grew up in inner-city Pittsburgh. Describing her childhood as "difficult," she says she ran away at the age of 17 and lived on the streets for a year. She was "one step from prostitution" before God pulled her out, she says.

She met Willie Mitchell in a nightclub where she worked, and the two married in 1967. A year later, they accepted Christ and Willie answered a call to preach, something his wife never expected. For 10 years the couple served at a church in Troy, Ohio, then moved to Dayton in 1988 to start an inner-city ministry.

Though content with being a pastor's wife and mother of their seven children, Marva began sensing that God was calling her to preach. However, her denomination didn't support preaching by women, her husband didn't believe in it, and for years she herself had been teaching against it.

When the couple started traveling within charismatic circles, they began to see women being used by God in ministry. "I could recognize the Spirit of God," Marva says. "I realized there was more to it than what I had been taught."

Later, she attended a conference where Bible teacher Marilyn Hickey prophesied to her. "Everything she prophesied to me took place, and it really amazed me. I began to see women God was using mightily."

She told her husband the Lord had called her to preach, and though it meant leaving their denomination, her husband supported her.

"God spoke to him and told him, 'Who are you to say who I chose?' And he listened to the voice of the Lord. He went to his overseer and told him, 'I know God has called my wife to the ministry, and as a preacher, I'm going to have to leave.'

“God also spoke to us and told us it was time for us to leave because there were people He wanted us to reach who were outside of the denomination. It wasn’t an easy step at first. We found ourselves alone in some instances and ostracized, but we were determined to do what God told us to do.”

The two began to co-pastor, and the church became more and more influential in the Dayton community. Initially designed to teach sidewalk Sunday school to inner-city children, the church’s outreach evolved into a feeding ministry, then an award-winning literacy program and even a program for truancy prevention. When they discovered that many of the children they were working with had parents on drugs, they started offering drug treatment services.

The effectiveness of their work eventually allowed the church’s nonprofit arm, Project Impact, to receive federal funding. Today the organization operates on a \$1.5 million budget and has 38 people on staff. Yet despite their success, the ministry has been well acquainted with grief.

In January 1998, Willie Mitchell discovered he had bone cancer; the prognosis was grim. Though the church prayed for a miracle, he died three months later, leaving his wife to take the helm of a 1,000-member church and a network of more than 20 churches.

Marva, who had just battled back from her stroke and cancer a few years before, was devastated. “Willie was my best friend,” she says, “the father of our children, my partner, my lover, my mentor. He was everything in my life.”

Even though she had been co-pastoring with her husband for 10 years, the new responsibilities left Marva overwhelmed and many times feeling as if she wanted to give up. “I gave up so much, I gave up giving up,” Marva says. To make matters worse, the church membership soon began to dwindle, reaching a low of about 600 people.

Even so, in 1999 the members of the ministerial fellowship asked her to become their bishop. Marva felt honored but reluctant.

“I wouldn’t allow them to use the word ‘bishop’ at the ceremony,” she says. “I told them, ‘I’m not going to do this.’ But the strange part about it is, I was doing this a year before my husband passed because he was so sickly. He was sending me to the churches then, so I did the work two years before I ever took the title.

“I don’t need a title to do a work; I need heart and an anointing. And since I possess both of those, I didn’t need to possess the title.”

Marva has warmed up to the title in the last few years as others in ministry have recognized her position as bishop. She says the church has stabilized, returning again to 1,000 members, and she believes this is a season of new beginnings for the church.

“I see Revival Center Ministries being very effective in the inner city, reaching out, working with youth and families. We have been appointed, I believe, to help inner-city churches see the need.”

She says churches are getting the message and credits her book *It Takes a Church to Raise a Village* (Treasure House) for helping to stir many congregations into action. Now she’s working on a second book, *The Church in Disguise*, which challenges the church body to “stop pretending.” Marva believes today’s church is often disguised as a circus—complete with jugglers, clowns and wild animals.

“It’s a place where people go to get a good feeling,” she says, “but they have no responsibility. They leave an offering, and there’s no relationship.

“We set up a stage, and we hired a bunch of performers, and

the world is saying, 'Somebody, help!' And if the church is not a hand in their community, then they really don't need to be in the community."

Marva admits she has a strong voice, a trait that has always marked her. While advocating that married women remain in biblical order, not usurping their husbands' authority, she encourages women in ministry to be themselves. "Do what God called you to do," she says. "Stay with the vision God placed in your heart. Don't try to be anything else but what God called you to do—and be a praying woman."

Even someone as no-nonsense as Marva admits to having had a few excuses of her own over the years. "The first time I went to Egypt and stood in front of a congregation of men, I thought, Lord, what is this all about? I can't do this. These men were looking at me like they wanted to kill me, but the Lord said, 'Preach!' I didn't want to, but I did. Since then I've been willing to try anything."

The side effects of Marva's stroke occasionally bring on times of discouragement. "When those times come, like God told Moses, 'I am.' He does it. He brings me through every time because He's faithful."

Plus, she wishes she didn't have to always wear sneakers. "It's kind of funny to be wearing a business suit and Reeboks—they just don't match!"

But, she says, that's not the point. "I thank God I can walk, even though it takes me a longer time. The Bible says the race isn't given to the swift or the strong, but to those who endure.

"So I'm in an endurance race. I can't walk, I can't run, I can't even dance. I can't lift up my hands unto the Lord. But what I can do, I do. I know as long as I keep trying, God is going to keep giving me strength to go through."

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