

Professor in The Pulpit

For more than 30 years, Kenneth Ulmer has worn two hats: pastor and academic. But just because he's stepped down as president of The King's University doesn't mean he's schooling his Los Angeles megachurch any less these days.

Some 25 years ago, three men who would later become pastors of some of the largest churches in Los Angeles gathered with 800 other ministers to pray at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood.

Pastors Jack Hayford, Lloyd Ogilvie and Kenneth C. Ulmer—all seated “by Providence” along the front row, Ulmer says—prayed for Hollywood and the nation. Bonded in that moment in a “spirit of like-mindedness,” the three have been friends ever since and get together several times a year to pray for one another.

“I think we formed a relationship of not only praying for each other, but being accountable to one another,” says Ulmer, now 64. “There has been no challenge, good or bad—no high point or low point—that we’ve had in the last 25 years that we haven’t gone through together. We have prayed together, cried together, gone through deaths together and been through challenges in our relationships. It’s just been a relationship of three men who love each other and who share life together.”

At a time of increasing moral failure among preachers, the “personal accountability prayer relationship” between Ulmer, Ogilvie and Hayford has helped them stay on the path of righteousness and enabled God to use them mightily, says Paul Chappell, executive vice president and chief academic officer at The King's University in Los Angeles.

“They meet regularly and have accountability to each other,” Chappell says. “It’s out of that accountability that they have done so many things.”

And for all three, that includes communicating revelation from God's Word as both pastors and professors.

"At King's, we have a homiletics class—a preaching course—and the three of them are professors," Chappell adds. "You are talking about the princes of the princes of preachers who come to do a modular course for three to five days, in which they teach together."

Today, Ulmer is the senior pastor of Faithful Central Bible Church, an Inglewood, Calif., church that meets at The Great Western Forum, the previous home of the Los Angeles Lakers. Since Ulmer came to the church in 1982, the congregation has grown from 150 people to thousands who gather weekly.

A founding board member of The King's University (the only accredited Pentecostal/charismatic seminary on the West Coast), Ulmer was tapped as president several years ago to lead its transformation from the The King's College and Seminary to The King's University.

After the school gained university status, he stepped down as president but still serves as vice-chairman of the board and leads the school's annual session at Oxford University. He says it's an honor to be used by God to help shape the lives and ministries of the emerging leaders of the kingdom.

"I think future leaders are called to one of the most exciting, yet challenging seasons in history," Ulmer says. "This is a rough time to be in ministry, and it's an exciting time to be in ministry. People called today [as ministers] were called for such a time as this."

Running From the Call

Ulmer was personally called into ministry during the Jesus movement of the 1970s. But unlike some of his colleagues, who began preaching at age 12 or 13, he didn't enter the ministry until age 29.

Although he had been a success academically and professionally—earning a bachelor's degree in broadcasting and music at the University of Illinois and working as a musician—Ulmer says he had been a private failure. He was divorced twice by age 25.

"I went through a bad suicidal season," he says. "At one time, I tried to take my life—the weight of failure. Academically, I had been an achiever. My professional life was going well too, but privately and personally I was a failure—disqualified and unusable by God."

At a low point in his life, Ulmer traveled to London to speak at a music workshop. While teaching at a chapel on a military base outside London, Ulmer was playing the organ as the choir sang "Revive Us, Oh Lord" and had a fiery encounter with the Holy Spirit.

"During that song, I said, 'I want to live again in your Holy Spirit,'" Ulmer says. "I felt the power of God in that little chapel on that Air Force base. Broken and weeping, I said to the Lord, 'If You can do anything with my broken life, You can have it because I've messed it up.' And that's when I knew the Lord was calling me to preach. It was at that point of surrender, accepting God's forgiveness."

A few years later, Ulmer had accepted God's forgiveness but was running from the call to preach. One Sunday morning in 1977, his pastor, Melvin Wade, preached a sermon titled, "You Can Run, But You Can't Hide," about Jonah, the biblical prophet who spent three days and nights in a great fish after refusing to follow God's orders to warn the city of Nineveh of its impending judgment.

"I was just like Jonah," Ulmer says. "I had been running. I had been afraid of what God was calling me to do. I had tried to do everything but that. But just like Jonah, I was running out of space."

At age 29, Ulmer decided to completely surrender his life to Jesus and become a minister. Not long afterward, he founded Macedonia Bible Baptist Church in San Pedro, Calif. Ulmer plunged almost obsessively into his ministerial training.

He met Benjamin Reid, a leader who would become a spiritual mentor for him—and the first black man he'd ever met who had an earned doctorate. Reid inspired him to work on getting his master's and doctorate degrees.

"I began this almost unquenchable thirst for education," Ulmer says. "It was not egotistical. I wanted to be as prepared as I could be."

In 1982, Ulmer accepted the new pastorate position at Faithful Central Missionary Baptist Church, which later became Faithful Central Bible Church. Most of the congregation at Macedonia came with him. Under his dynamic preaching style, the church exploded, growing to 400 members in a few years. About this time, Reid told Ulmer about the Spirit-filled life and speaking in tongues. Raised a Baptist, Ulmer was apprehensive.

One night, however, he went to a "Prayer Breakthrough" meeting at the Anaheim Convention Center led by Larry Lea. Amid the gathering of 20,000 people—while at a "very lonely, very confused and very frustrating place in my spirit and mind," Ulmer says—he asked God to fill him with the Holy Spirit and release the heavenly language to him.

Suddenly he began speaking in tongues, allowing his spirit to communicate with God through the Holy Spirit. He recalls the experience as "phenomenal" and "inexplicable."

"It was the textbook 'rivers of living water flowing up out of your belly,'" Ulmer says. "For 15 or 20 minutes, this language overflowed out of my spirit. In my mind, I was wondering how it was happening, but in my spirit I was praying to God.

"It was joy. It was exciting. It was scary. It was

intellectually confusing. It was spiritually fulfilling. It was about humbling myself, getting beyond my intellect and logic, and allowing the Holy Spirit to be the Holy Spirit.”

A Scholar Is Born

In 1986 Ulmer began to teach his church about the fullness of life in the Spirit. By 1988 the membership of the church had doubled. “Our church still had a Baptist sign out front, but inside we were embracing charismatic and Pentecostal theology,” he says. “There is a sovereign move of God there.”

As attendance grew—sometimes with lines around the block on Sunday mornings—the church relocated to ever-larger venues. In 2000, Ulmer’s church purchased the 17,500-seat Great Western Forum, the nation’s only African-American-owned entertainment venue of its kind.

While serving as pastor, Ulmer continued his ministerial studies. He received a doctorate from Grace Graduate School of Theology in Long Beach, Calif., and was awarded an honorary doctor of divinity from the Southern California School of Ministry and a doctor of ministry from United Theological Seminary.

Over the years, he has served as an instructor in pastoral ministry and homiletics at Grace Theological Seminary. At Biola and Pepperdine universities and Fuller Theological Seminary he has served as an adjunct professor.

“God never blesses us for us,” he observes. “He blesses us to bless someone else. All we receive, even education, is something we are to steward and pass on to others. So the excitement for me about teaching is the ability to serve as a vessel through which I pass along something I’ve already received.”

Ulmer, married for 35 years with three children and five grandchildren, is also the presiding bishop over Macedonia

International Bible Fellowship in Johannesburg, South Africa, an association that represents ministries in Africa and the U.S.

The author of several books, including *A New Thing: A Theological and Personal Look at the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship* and *The Power of Money: How to Avoid a Devil's Snare*, Ulmer spends his time now pastoring his church and teaching. His newest book, *Knowing God's Voice*, came out last fall.

Ogilvie, president of Leadership Unlimited, author of more than 50 books, and formerly the pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood and chaplain of the U.S. Senate, says the prayer accountability fellowship between the three men has contributed to some "marvelous breakthroughs" in Ulmer's ministry.

Ogilvie says he can't say enough good things about "this man of God because he has allowed God to use him so mightily."

"Ken Ulmer is one of the great spiritual leaders of our time," Ogilvie says. "He is a biblical scholar, filled with the Spirit, a responsible churchman and an open, honest friend and source of renewal and hope in our community."

*An award-winning journalist at the Los Angeles Daily News, The Press-Enterprise and other newspapers for 20 years, **Troy Anderson** writes for Reuters, Newsmax, Charisma and other print and online publications. Anderson lives in Irvine, Calif. Visit his website at .*

To watch Kenneth Ulmer teach on hearing the voice of God click [here](#).