

Church Remodeled

Bishop Dr. R.C. Hugh Nelson and Pastor Diana Nelson saw great potential for what God could do through the people of their new congregation when they arrived in New York City. Leaving Canada's capital in 2003, the Nelsons were called to ministry at the Church of God of East Flatbush in Brooklyn.

"I felt, in my own spirit, that the opportunity of doing ministry in a city such as New York was a great opportunity," Bishop Nelson says. "That means that there's access to people of a wide range of ethnicity and race, and therefore, the chance to explore varied types of ministry models."

Bishop Nelson was a good fit to lead the Church of God of East Flatbush, which Jamaican immigrants founded 50 years ago this fall. He and Pastor Diana were both born in Jamaica, and she was raised in London, England.

In 1982, Bishop Nelson joined his family in London and later that year accepted a scholarship to study at the European Theological Seminary in Rudersberg, Germany. He also studied biblical archaeological studies in Jerusalem, Israel. Bishop Nelson returned to London, where he completed his ministerial internship with the Wood Green Church of God. He married his former classmate Diana Griffiths before accepting a scholarship to pursue his master of divinity degree at the Church of God Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee. After completing his master's degree, he completed advanced clinical pastoral education. The couple pastored briefly in Cleveland, Tennessee, before moving to Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, where they served for eight and a half years as senior pastor of the Ottawa Church of God. Seventeen years ago, they accepted the call to be pastors of the Church of God of East Flatbush in Brooklyn, New York.

Pastor Diana was a microbiologist after earning her bachelor's

at the University of East London. Later, she added to her education with a master of divinity at New York Theological Seminary.

“We’re partners in life and ministry,” says Bishop Nelson, who also noted that the congregation of about 1,700 has three other associate pastors, Pauline Gayle, Gloria Edwards and Edward Nyarko, who provide oversight to missions, children’s outreach, membership discipleship and the many other aspects of the church’s ministry.

Remodeling the Church

At the time of the Nelsons’ arrival in New York, the Church of God of East Flatbush functioned as a first-generation congregation and had about 700 members.

“There was only one non-first-generation Jamaican in leadership,” Bishop Nelson says. “I discovered very quickly that the entire leadership was almost 100% first-generation Jamaican, which meant that although there were several other nationalities present, they were not engaged in leadership, and the first-generation American-born members were also relegated to the margins of ministry leadership.”

In light of his international travels, Bishop Nelson felt there had to be a change to include more representation in leadership that reflected the diversity of the church.

“For a church to grow in a healthy way, there has to be an intentional integration,” he says. “That means, if the community demographics changes around the church and we failed to embrace and integrate those on the margins, we would forfeit the full potential of what the ministry could become. We had to make a concerted effort to address the issue. Although the congregation is made up of minorities representing Black Americans, Caribbean and Africa immigrants, we still had to ensure that there was a platform which affirmed and respected the diversity of the varied

nationalities.”

Recognizing that the church functioned in a more “insular” way, Bishop Nelson and the leadership team began to envision a ministry model that was more inclusive. They took on the challenge to transform the ministry system to function as an urban ministry center. They established five ministry goals to ensure that all ministry activities would move the organization in a concerted fashion.

“The first is to equip and to empower the congregation, making discipleship training as the pivotal activity. The second goal is mobilizing the members to do ministry beyond the walls of the sanctuary. The third one is to develop strong leadership. The fourth goal is to forge community partnerships with the police, the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Children Services. The fifth goal is to acquire additional properties for the expansion of the ministry.”

These five goals became the focus of the entire leadership team in the newly restructured church model.

“The idea, therefore, was to shift the focus of ministry from the concept of gathering on a weekly basis, toward an external community engagement, which focused on the needs of the city. The urban ministry model falls into three categories: Benevolence, Education and Urban Ministry Training.”

Pastor Diana is principally in charge of benevolence in her role as the executive director of the Hope Center Development Corporation, a nonprofit organization that serves about 2,500 people on a weekly basis.

“They have now established partnerships with the Brooklyn District Attorney’s office, United Way, the Food Bank of New York and Feed the Children. On a weekly basis, we provide hot meals, groceries, clothes distribution, family crisis intervention, parental support and a seniors’ drop-in center,” Bishop Nelson says. “We also provide a yearly health fair,

financial seminars and foster care support.”

The ministry also provides a sidewalk children ministry with the use of a ministry truck that goes out into the community. The side of the truck can be lowered to make a stage, and then used to proclaim the gospel through poems, puppetry and songs.

Under the education focus, volunteers staff an Adult Learning Center. The church also runs a GED (General Education Diploma) class, an English as a Second Language course, Project Family Restoration for formerly incarcerated individuals, job training, scholarship programs, after-school tutoring and a computer lab.

“It is exciting to see seniors learn how to maneuver the computer, set up a Facebook page and navigate their smartphone,” he says.

Under the urban ministry focus, church members learn to connect with local residents and communicate the gospel through meaningful relationships.

“This is where we train the congregation to engage the urban landscape as missionaries,” he says. “Even though many of our members migrated from different countries, we were not necessarily exposed to urban living. We discovered that effective ministry in America’s largest city would challenge our previous mindset and drive us to function with a greater awareness of our ministry context.

To help members better understand urban ministry, the church did a monthly series of events called “Urban Realities.” These events focused on urban issues such as prostitution, alcohol/drug abuse, HIV, transgender issues and human trafficking. Bishop Nelson cited one special Urban Realities event when a male ex-prostitute shared his testimony of life on the streets and how he came to Christ. At the end of the presentation, the congregation was allowed to ask questions for greater clarity.

“The final question was an open dialogue as to how the congregation could have ministered to this gentleman if he had walked through our doors,” Bishop Nelson says. “These dialogues move the congregation beyond merely hearing an inspirational story to an experiential one which reshapes the mindset and culture of the congregation.”

Chaplaincy training also falls under the urban ministry focus.

“We have over 100 certified community chaplains who provide weekly ministry to local hospitals, nursing homes, homeless shelters, police precincts, disaster response and even grief support,” Bishop Nelson noted. “Even during the season of COVID-19, it was refreshing to see our chaplains visible, deployed and doing practical ministry while the city was under siege by the coronavirus.”

Leading by Example

Bishop Nelson wanted to show the congregation how important community service is, so he took a big step.

“It’s one thing to talk about what we could be doing in the community, and it’s another thing to model it,” he says. “So for a couple of years, after completing the police academy training, he served as a volunteer police officer, or what is known as an auxiliary police officer. On Monday nights, I would put on the uniform and patrol my neighborhood for four hours. I wanted to set an example to our members so that they could discern ministry opportunities right around them. I’ve always worked closely with the police. I served at one point as president of the Brooklyn Clergy Council Task Force and continue to serve as an assistant president of the 67th Clergy Precinct Council.”

When Eric Garner died in 2014 in police custody, the police commissioner and his top brass met with Bishop Nelson and other local clergy at his church to discuss the police and community relationship. Bishop Nelson has also been involved

in recent protests against police brutality and racism after George Floyd's death in Minneapolis.

"On a recent Saturday night after having been out most of the day feeding the poor and ministering to those at risk, he got home and settled in, but was later called to provide clergy support at the day's protest demonstrations in Brooklyn," he says. "So I showed up in my jacket with 'God Squad' emblazoned on the back to identify who we were. We stayed at the protest till after 10:30 p.m. as a pastoral presence and to discourage looting."

In his role as a district pastor for his denomination, he connected with fellow ministers and got involved in the protests.

"I reached out to some of our pastors because we needed to have a response whereby the church is seen as being there to support the voice of those who were protesting police brutality, and to be a voice of peace and reconciliation," he says. "As we gathered on the steps of the church building, we wanted the protestors to know here was a place where they could be accepted and heard. For one hour, we prayed, acknowledged the pain of racism and the reality of police brutality. At the same time, we wanted to encourage peaceful protests and discourage destruction of property. After that prayer vigil, the media interviewed us, and other pastors requested that continue the following Sunday evening. This time we met at one of our major intersections, Church Avenue and Utica Avenue, and led thousands of people in a march to the church steps. The cops blocked off the streets and with a large gathering standing around, we prayed against police abuse, systemic racism and the plight of our young black men."

Bishop Nelson has also long been involved with public health. He is a member of the board of trustees of the One Brooklyn Hospital System, which joins Brookdale University hospital, Interfaith Medical Center and Kingsbrook Healthcare System.

"I've been on weekly briefings with the hospital as we had to go through the pandemic," he says. "With New York having lost over 22,000 people in a short time, I also consulted with some of the funeral directors as they struggled with the overload of funeral homes. We are grateful that our chaplains were able to respond even during this deadly pandemic by performing last rites and providing grief counsel."

Bishop Nelson works "very comfortably" with both police and health professionals. Ultimately, in many ways, he is an example to his church of the call to serve the community in the name of Christ.

"The congregation knows I'm out there in the community, so it is easy for them to find creative ways to also engage the needs of the community."

Expanding Their Reach

The Church of God of East Flatbush took an unusual step for a church in seeking to meet the housing needs of the city. Instead of going it alone to meet this need, the church partnered with three developers to build affordable housing as well as its own new worship center.

"Our church has been strapped for space for years," Bishop Nelson says. "This has long preceded my coming, and so we recognize that if we were going to function as an urban ministry center, providing ministry space for youth and seniors, etc., we needed to step out of the box and explore innovative options. In 2011, we took a leap of faith and purchased two city blocks, which at the time cost us \$8.1 million. That was a major leap for a local congregation. All the doors we had explored in terms of warehouses were beyond our financial capacity. At first, we were thinking just in terms of church space, but then we discovered that even after purchasing, building could be a major financial expedition."

But then, there was a breakthrough around that time.

"We had a new mayor who promised to create, to sponsor, to support more affordable housing," Bishop Nelson says. "And so we purchased for \$8.1 million, and began the arduous process of rezoning this property. It was zoned for commercial use only, and God gave us favor."

With the rezoning approved, "we are able to now build out a 40,000-square-foot ministry space and 530 apartments above," he says. "Now this is possible because God gave us favor. The need for housing in New York City is huge, and we are excited that we are able to address not only the spiritual needs but also the housing demand."

The schedule has changed somewhat due to circumstances beyond its control, but the church looks forward to the project's completion.

"They should have been able to turn our space over to us in September and then we could begin fit-out," he says. "Because of COVID-19, it has pushed it to January 2021. No doubt, we're in the process of building a state-of-the-art urban ministry space through which we'll be able to provide life-saving ministry to our residents right here and at the same time have 530 affordable apartments built above our ministry space."

The church is pleased to be able to meet this housing need.

"To live in New York City is becoming increasingly impossible," he says. "Folks cannot afford to live in New York. The salaries are excellent, but the housing cost is becoming impossible. Some people have to move outside of the state and commute a long distance to work. By providing affordable housing, the cost of the apartments will now be, to a great extent, determined by percentage of income. This affords moderate- to even lower-income residents to find an opportunity to live in the same place that they work."

The congregation calls the campaign "Building for Greater."

“The project is called Ebenezer Plaza, as referenced in 1 Samuel 7:12, ‘Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen. And he called its name Ebenezer saying, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us.’”

Bishop Nelson hopes that as other ministries hear of the miracle in New York City, they will be able to come alongside as partners and assist in the costly fit-out expense of Ebenezer Plaza as the church continues to provide ministry in one of the world’s most expensive cities.

Just as the church made developers its partners, now it is looking for mission-focused partners. These partners could be churches or ministries “especially in the South or other less populated areas that may even consider exposing their young people to a summer program in New York City,” Bishop Nelson says. “So we established Urban Reach, a program where we can facilitate short-term urban missions, mission trips from ministries around this country that would like to have their young people come to New York City, work with us and get exposed to ministering in an urban setting.”

The Church of God of East Flatbush congregation truly lives out its core values, which encompass the usual ministry emphases of a church—evangelism, Scripture and prayer—as well as relationship, empathy, cultural diversity and trust. With the vision of “Making Disciples to Impact our World,” this Spirit-led congregation aims to fulfill Christ’s Great Commission by serving its own Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth.

Christine D. Johnson is an editor at Charisma Media and podcast host of Charisma Connection.