

She's Got A Testimony

Some people may not like her forceful preaching style. But one thing is for sure: When Paula White found Jesus, her life was transformed

Rising tall and slender from her seat, Paula White walks to the platform with confidence. With a big Bible clutched tightly in her hand like a special-delivery package, she grabs the microphone and sets the stage for a Holy Ghost rally.

"How many of you know God's about to reverse the curse in your life?" she asks, her voice booming out to the nearly 6,000 churchgoers attending Super Sunday. "Slap somebody upside the head and say, 'Reverse the curse!'"

Radical praise erupts from one side of Bishop T.D. Jakes' cavernous Potter's House church in Dallas to the other. The 38-year-old woman who has primed this crowd and hundreds more like it is a feisty, charismatic preacher. White has managed to overthrow barriers common to her female contemporaries and become one of the most sought-after preachers—male or female.

"When pastor Paula White shares who she is, where she's been and how the Lord brought her through, she encourages her audiences to hope for change," Jakes told Charisma.

White has crisscrossed diverse lines to minister in the Church of God in Christ, the Greek Orthodox Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church and prayed for accused singer Michael Jackson.

In 2001, she launched Paula White Ministries and signed on to broadcast her weekly TV show with secular network giant Black

Entertainment Television. A popular author, White has written several books including *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not* (Charisma House).

Clad in a black suit and stilettos that make her look taller than she is, the 5-foot 5-inch preacher struts across the stage to drive home another point in her sermon: "I don't know who I'm here for, but somebody's going to receive a divine reversal!"

"Preeeach, Paula! Preach!" the mostly African American congregants yell to the pretty Anglo woman who some describe as Barbie-like, with her trim figure, fashionable clothes and neat blond hairstyle.

For these mainly black worshipers who have flocked to hear White's message, color seems to be a nonissue. They've come to receive a word from God, and it doesn't matter to them if her skin is a different color from theirs. Her ability to connect with diverse audiences, say her supporters, is due primarily to her ability to keep it "real."

Pastor Randy White knows why his wife is making significant strides in the church. "She is dedicated and committed to the study of the Word, to stay in His presence and to consecrate herself," says White, who along with his wife, founded Without Walls International Church (WWIC) in Tampa, Florida.

Though she has become practically a household name among Pentecostal Christians as a preacher of faith-and-victory messages, Paula White is no overnight success. She ministered for years to children and youth in inner cities.

Nor is she the product of a lineage of preachers who paved the way for her to become a well-known minister. She, in fact, didn't hear the gospel for the first time until she was 18.

Charisma learned during a recent interview that there's another side to the Paula White we see today.

For many years she struggled to overcome a childhood marred by suicide, sexual abuse, poverty and an ongoing dysfunctional family life. It was an upbringing that could have ruined her forever, but it instead prepared her for the ministry she is so passionate about today—reaching brokenhearted, abused and discarded people.

Tragedy Strikes

As a child growing up in Tupelo, Mississippi, White seemed to have a near-perfect life. Her well-to-do parents, Donald and Janelle Furr, were successful entrepreneurs who owned toy stores in the city. Her mother managed the day-to-day operations of the business, and White remembers tagging alongside her father when he'd handle business outside the office.

"Every morning my daddy would take me to breakfast. He would draw smiley faces on my pancakes, and we would go off to the country club and play golf or gin rummy," White recalls.

But there was another side to the likeable, savvy businessman. He gambled and drank.

And before long, tragedy struck White's idyllic childhood. One

day in 1971, when her parents were separated, Donald arrived at Janelle and the kids' home in a drunken stupor.

Grabbing for his daughter, he insisted to his wife: "Give me Paula or I'll kill myself."

"My father started bashing my mom in the head with his arm," White remembers. Donald spent the night in jail, and after his release he later killed himself, White says.

It was hard for 5-year-old Paula to understand why the man she remembers today as a "big teddy bear, nurturer and caregiver" would kill himself. She found it equally hard to believe people when they told her she was the apple of her daddy's eye. "For years I would say to myself, 'If he loved me so much, why did he leave me?'"

This question sent White on a quest for unconditional love—and ultimately into the hands of a loving God. Because the tragedy left Janelle with the responsibility of raising her two children by herself, the family went headlong into poverty.

Not long after the suicide, White experienced tragedy of another sort. From the ages of 6 to 13 she was sexually molested. The abuse wasn't "consistent or constant," she says, but she told Charisma that trusted caregivers, teachers and even close relatives violated her during those seven years.

White is aware she isn't alone. According to recent statistics, 3 million children in the United States are victimized every year by one or more sex offenders. In U.S. churches, the numbers are blurry because the abuse wasn't confronted until the sex scandal in the Roman Catholic Church

in recent years brought the problem to the national forefront.

That's why White says she is grateful for the release of Jakes' *Woman, Thou Art Loosed: The Movie*, which aired in 408 theaters around the country after its release in 2004. The film is a continuation of Jakes' longtime message of the healing God offers for sexually and emotionally abused women.

A mother now herself, White has forgiven the sexual predators who preyed on her body during those abusive days. But she didn't stop there. In an effort to prevent other children from experiencing the same fate, WWIC provides a safe haven for thousands of inner-city young people through its Operation Explosion Outreach Ministries.

Finding God's Love

Like others scarred by alcoholism, suicide and abuse, the family reeled from the pain that had invaded their home. White acted as caregiver to her brother while their mom scraped to make ends meet, when she wasn't dealing with problems, White remembers.

"Through it all, I always knew my mother loved me. Today, she is a born-again believer, my best friend and confidante," White says.

The sexual and physical abuse that had crept into White's life as a youngster began to manifest in ways she had no control over. She exemplified symptoms typical of molested children.

White became clingy, sucked a bottle and masturbated. One day

a teacher sent a note home describing her as a “traumatized, troubled young girl.”

“My teacher stood me in a corner and spanked me in front of the class because I wet myself. She never discerned that something is wrong in this child’s life,” White says.

Not only did she have to struggle with abandonment issues stemming from her father’s death, she also had to contend with rejection from other children. But as a teenager, White was popular, pretty and sexually active.

In 10th grade her boyfriend, a member of the high school wrestling team, taught her how to control her weight through purging. As a result she suffered from bulimia for years afterward. Meanwhile her hunger for love became so deep that she lost her identity.

Says White: “I thought if [my father] left me because I was unlovable, then I would become what you think is ‘loveable.’ Is that a straight-A student? A pretty girl? Is that an athlete or someone who jumps in bed with you? What is it?”

While White was living with a boyfriend, God intruded on her life. “I went with a friend to someone’s house and when I walked in the door, out of the blue a man named Butch said, ‘I see your pain,’” she recounts.

White had done such a good job of masking the hurt, she thought it was impossible for a complete stranger to know anything about her. That day, however, she became a born-again Christian. The man also led her through steps of deliverance.

What she had spent the last 13 years searching for was found in one moment. White spent what seemed like hours at the house, she says, while the Holy Spirit transformed her life. She says God's love consumed her.

"My guarded heart was pierced with the love that I had been on a journey looking for," she says. "For the first time in my life, I knew love."

Before White left her friend's house that day in Baltimore, Butch told her to find a church to attend. Newly saved and eager to learn more about Jesus, she became absorbed in the Bible and visited numerous churches.

During a period when she attended a Nazarene church she noticed that her friend, who always seemed bubbly, would sneak away from the service on Sunday nights. When her friend told White she was leaving to get her "fix" at the small Pentecostal church, White asked if she could do the same.

"I went to that Pentecostal church and grabbed the back of the pew," she recalls. "I'm thinking, Everybody's crazy!"

She soon felt at ease when God spoke to her heart: "This is of Me and it's OK. It's OK."

But it was the Word, not the church experience, that had the greatest impact on White. For the next two years, she saturated herself with the Bible. One day, she says, she was simply worshiping God when He instantly healed her of the bulimia she still was struggling with.

“From my feet to the tips of my fingers, I could feel God remove the bondages. He fully restored my metabolism,” she remembers.

A New Life Begins

White eventually found a church home in the city, and when the janitor at her church quit, her pastor—T.L. Lowery, of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)—asked White to clean the church nursery. Lowery noticed her commitment to that job and asked her to teach the 2- and 3-year-olds, and later the 4- and 5-year-olds.

White says she must have studied 80 hours a week just to make sure her lesson plans were doctrinally correct and on a level the children could understand.

She was working at the Church of God headquarters in Baltimore when she met Randy, a divorcé, who was an associate pastor at a small church in the area. The two were married two years later against the advice of a few church members who said Paula wasn’t “ministry material.”

Randy, however, paid the comments no mind. The Whites now have been married for 15 years.

The couple moved to Washington, D.C., but left the city in 1990 after Randy sensed God telling him to move to Florida. It wasn’t long before the Whites rolled into inner-city Tampa in 1991 with a vision to reach out to hurting people.

Their strategy to win souls through evangelism and restoration

paid off. The next year, South Tampa Christian Center opened. In 1997, the name was changed to Without Walls International Church to reflect the Whites' vision of a church where people who would never cross the threshold of a traditional ministry could worship. Its catchy motto reflects its paradoxical purpose: "The Perfect Church for People Who Aren't."

Known today for its diversity, the church of some 15,000 members serves as a training ground for those seeking to spread evangelism and outreach throughout the country. The staff at WWIC have trained believers who represent more than 200 ministries in the United States and abroad.

In Luke 15:8-10 Jesus tells the parable of a woman who searched untiringly until she found a valuable silver coin she had lost. Like this woman, Paula White specializes in searching—for lost people for the kingdom of God.

While living in Baltimore, she would give food to homeless people and tell them about God. She would strike up conversations with strangers so she could share the gospel with them. That combination early in her Christian life of meeting physical needs and telling people about Jesus is what still drives her today.

Nothing stirs White more than her love for sinners. During her interview with Charisma, she cried three times as she shared her passion for unbelievers.

She will have the opportunity to reach even more people when her new TV studio, located at the church, opens later this month. Her TV program, Paula White Today, is seen by millions of people in the United States and is broadcast worldwide as

well.

Although in her childhood she was traumatized by her father's death and devastated by molestation, White never contemplated suicide. A vision she had when she was 18 reveals why.

"The Lord showed me ... millions of people," she says. "When I would open my mouth, masses and millions of people would get saved, delivered or healed. But when I shut my mouth, the people would fall into utter darkness.

"I knew then God was calling me to preach the gospel. My answer to Him was, 'Yes, Lord.' Today my answer remains the same."

Can I Get A Witness?

Some people say Paula White can dissect Scripture like the scholarly Rev. Jackie McCullough, while others say she preaches similar to Bishop T.D. Jakes. One thing is certain, White's preaching has opened doors for her to minister to a large following that continues to grow.

Her spiritual agenda has taken her to every continent on the globe to offer restoration to suffering people through evangelism. She accomplishes her goal with a simple message: "Heal hearts, touch lives and save souls."

But White will tell you there's no secret to her preaching. In fact, she credits Jakes, her "spiritual father," with mentoring her in the presentation of the gospel.

"Bishop Jakes has had a great impact on my style and delivery," says White, who has a copy of every sermon in Jakes' library. McCullough, who is a doctoral candidate at Drew Theological Seminary, has also influenced White.

A Southern girl who in the past called herself "trailer park trash" now knows why her messages knock down barriers. "I'm called to be a reconciler, like David," explains White, who says God is using her, like He did the ancient Hebrew king, to bridge two kingdoms. In her case, however, it's the divide between races.

According to Ebony magazine, White is charting a course less traveled by others in Christian circles. "You know you're on to something new and significant when the most popular woman preacher on the Black Entertainment Network is a white woman," it reported.

For evangelist Joyce Rodgers, White's ministry is essential to the church. "Pastor Paula delivers the Word with great passion that empowers anyone who hears her," Rodgers observes.

In fact, White expects to receive more than 1,000 speaking invitations in 2005, which do not include the 120-plus offers for her to minister internationally, according to Jennifer Mallan, spokesperson for the church.

White does not wrestle with her ministry calling as a nationally known female evangelist. She has struggled, however, with the failures of her past. "I thought I wasn't ministry material, but the Holy Spirit ripped off the labels," White says.

Today, she is certain of her purpose. "If you cut me, I'll bleed evangelism," she said.

Valerie G. Lowe is associate editor for Charisma. She interviewed Paula White in Tampa, Florida.