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BELIEFS | RELIGION NOTEBOOK

Faith leaps in to lead, raise funds, face tough issues

By K. Connie Kang
Times Staff Writer

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The six weeks since Christmas has been an eventful time for Southern California's faith community.

A historic Los Angeles church installed a new senior pastor. A Whittier congregation's Christmas collection to help children in Africa topped \$500,000 this week. Presbyterian leaders brought to Los Angeles "No2Torture," a national campaign challenging the government's interrogation practices involving enemy combatants. And African American pastors from around the country grappled with difficult issues facing black churches at their annual conference.

New at the helm

At the 132-year-old First Baptist Church of Los Angeles, the Rev. Carlton A. Rhoden, 31, became the first black person to take the helm. The church, whose members included pioneer families the Lankershims and Van Nuyses, was founded in 1874, when the population of Los Angeles was 6,500.

The Jan. 20 ceremony at the Wilshire Center area church brought Rhoden's family, friends and mentors from around the country to First Baptist's magnificent sanctuary, with its ornate ceiling patterned after a chapel in Ducal Palace in Mantua, Italy.

Rhoden, a 2005 graduate of the American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, was ordained and installed during the service. This is his first pastoral call.

As Rhoden knelt, the Rev. John Townsend, who retired in 1997 after 35 years at First Baptist, offered an ordination prayer and led in the laying of hands.

"This act signifies the communication of the continuation of ministry, clergyperson to clergyperson, across the years, across the generations," Townsend said, inviting the clergy in the sanctuary to encircle Rhoden and place their hands on his shoulder.

In his prayer for the new senior pastor, Townsend said: "O Lord, cause an abundant measure of thy love to fill his life, that he may love thy people everywhere, standing with them in their joys and sorrows, their sickness and health, their faith and doubt."

Rhoden, who is married and the father of a baby son, was filled with emotion.

"I am overjoyed and overwhelmed," he said. "It's hard to find words, when I look around and see all the wonderful people who really helped, who really poured into me so that I could be here today."

The Rev. Keith A. Russell, president of the American Baptist Seminary of the West, reminded his former student that he has many mentors willing and ready to help him.

"We need to stay in your mind," Russell told Rhoden.

In an interview, Rhoden said urban ministry would be challenging, but he was prepared to take the plunge.

The congregation is 29% white, 9% black, 9% Korean, 9% Filipino, 41% Latino and 3% other groups.

Florence Slade, a First Baptist member for 30 years, said it would be good to have a young pastor "who would be appealing to our younger group."

Russell said this was not an easy time for the church, a new pastor or city churches such as First Baptist. The role of gays and lesbians in the church and justice ministry are among the topics prompting debate.

"Our denomination has been in so much conflict these last five years that it's hard for a new minister to come in and have support because there are so many sides," he said.

Still, the seminary wants to encourage men and women to "stay faithful even in times when it's not as easy" because ministry is a "calling" from God,

he said.

'Miracle' charity drive

Whittier Area Community Church, a 2,400-member congregation, has been buzzing with excitement.

"We're building a hospital!" the Rev. William Carl Ankerberg announced on the church website this week. "Praise God for the outpouring of love and support for the pediatric hospital in Malawi."

Shortly before Christmas, Ankerberg — whose daughter spent a year on a long-term mission in Malawi, one of the poorest nations in the world — called on parishioners to contribute to building a children's hospital in the capital of Lilongwe. The goal was \$160,000.

His parishioners made a miracle happen, he said, by dipping into their savings, giving up vacations and Christmas gifts and selling a car.

"One couple donated money they would have used for fertility drugs for the month in the hopes that even if they couldn't have a baby, maybe they could help save the life of someone else's baby," said Vickie Cooke, a church staffer who is keeping track of the fundraising.

As of this week, the total was \$561,068.45.

On Feb. 22, when a doctor from Malawi visits the church to discuss the project, officials will hand over the first installment, said Cooke.

"We were blown away by the final amount," said church member Barb Christing.

As a stay-at-home mom who loves raising children, she said she couldn't bear the thought of her counterparts in Malawi losing their babies because "someone somewhere" would not rise to the occasion.

"I was that someone," she said.

Even her teenage stepdaughter took money out of her savings to contribute to the hospital fund, she said.

"To think that our church on one evening could do that," Christing said. "It just makes you think, 'What if each parish in America chose a country in Africa or in Asia?' We really can work together to make a difference."

A look at torture

Presbyterian leaders, including the Rev. Rick Ufford-Chase, former moderator of the 2.4 million-member Presbyterian Church (USA), brought to Los Angeles a national campaign to demand fair treatment for prisoners in connection with the war on terror.

During a two-day conference Jan. 19 and 20, "No2Torture" supporters met at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Westchester to "strategize, network and equip" themselves to speak the "truth about torture, so that we might pursue justice, healing and true global security," said Carol Wickersham, "No2Torture" coordinator.

"The group is trying to look at what's happening with the Military Commissions Act and with the torture situation with the CIA and secret detention centers and habeas corpus" proceedings, said the Rev. Howard Dotson, pastor of Palms Westminster Presbyterian Church in West Los Angeles.

"Jesus' life and teachings about loving your enemy challenges us to look at the human rights of people that we would deem as our enemy," he said.

Speakers at the conference included Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, and George Hunsinger, a professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theology Seminary in New Jersey.

Pastors unite

Pastors attending the 2007 Pastors and Laity Conference in Los Angeles this week said black church leaders needed to work together for the good of the community.

If pastors "can learn to get along, then we can come together as a people," said the Rev. Gailen Reeves, pastor of Lincoln Memorial United Church of Christ in Los Angeles.

He also said in an interview that it's important for pastors "to submerge their egos" and to really listen to others when working together.

Parishioners, meanwhile, face another challenge.

Reeves said some church members didn't want to volunteer their time to serve the community and would avoid helping others by using excuses such as "I've had a hard week" or "My kids are driving me crazy."

But Reeves said Christians are commanded to serve others, especially the neediest.

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connie.kang@latimes.com

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