



A group of small urban churches has shifted its focus to education, partnering with public schools to help African Americans out of the cycle of illiteracy and unemployment.

Photos by GARY FRIEDMAN / Los Angeles Times

PREACHING SUCCESS

In a church social hall in south Los Angeles, a group of black Christian pastors itemized what they want: political leverage, public funds, housing projects that work. But most important, they want a role for the church in lifting African American students off the lowest rung of public education and a church-based program for adults who need high school equivalency certificates.

By **MARY ROURKE**
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At the end of the meeting, Pastor Welton Pleasant invoked Amos, the Old Testament prophet. Most preachers invoke the words to warn of vengeance, but Pleasant turned them into a promise of hope.

"Let justice run down like a mighty stream," he said with unusual gentleness.

Could social justice for African Americans spring from this pink stucco church that looks like a motel? Could the computer lab upstairs be the mighty stream that moves the neighborhood beyond illiteracy and unemployment?

That is the plan in dozens of small, low-income churches across Los Angeles, Compton and Inglewood. After nine years of hard work, 45 pastors have established a network of education programs that reaches into the community and offers help to struggling students, whether or not they attend a church.

At every step, the pastors have faced barriers. There are issues of church and state, resistance from teachers' unions and the challenge of convincing friends as well as enemies that their untested proposal for a partnership with schools can work.

The group, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches, known as LAM, sees its mission as a logical extension of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. It aims to recapture that era's urgency, which was directed away

Please see Churches, E3



At top, Kendrick Bolton, 8, finds a homework haven at the learning center at South Los Angeles Baptist Church. Kenneth Smith helps Jeremi Anderson, 10, with his reading. And Tracy Handcox gives 6-year-olds Devin Davis, left, and Lawrence Jones, some math lessons.

Churches

Continued from E1

from education issues once legislation seemed to guarantee equal opportunity.

"We're post-civil rights," said the Rev. Eugene Williams, 39, L.A. Metropolitan's executive director. "The aim now is to work on local, priority issues."

Along with education, L.A. Metropolitan congregations are rehabilitating neighborhood buildings for decent housing, converting abandoned gas stations to new businesses, opening sewing centers that sell basic clothing, and providing low-cost computer services.

The group shies away from naming a founder or a charismatic leader, but clearly the vision for L.A. Metropolitan began with Williams. A former postal workers union organizer turned neighborhood organizer in Philadelphia, Williams came west in 1991 with the dream of bringing together small churches for social change. Now the associate pastor of Mount Olive Second Baptist church in Watts, Williams spent his first two years in Los Angeles forming a leadership team of like-minded pastors who listened to the concerns of their congregations.

Education a Top Priority

Unemployment, prison records for 13% of African American men nationwide and housing made the short list. But education, the engine that can drive African American children out of this cycle, came first.

The L.A. Metropolitan solution is "One Church One School," a program that uses church facilities as learning centers to supplement class work.

The aim is for all 45 churches to open labs where adults and children can learn computer skills. Williams estimated the preliminary costs for L.A. Metropolitan's education programs at just more than \$300,000. The Los Angeles Unified School District, he said, has agreed to contribute about half the funds for the adult education program and computer expenses.

L.A. Metropolitan also has created a parent organization that offers them what Williams calls "non-traditional education." Williams wants parents from the churches to be savvy about potential trouble spots in the local public schools, from annual budgets and teacher credentials to academic ratings.

"If 500 parents go into a meeting with school administrators and they're well-prepared, they'll know what questions to ask," he said.

There is no precedent for L.A. Metropolitan's program, a fact that is at once the best and the hardest thing about it. Only 12 of the 45 churches in the organization now have a computer lab and 11 have a tutoring program. Progress has been slowed by limited funds, as well as the need to hard-wire older buildings to accommodate the new technology.

When things do fall into place, however, the response is swift. Ten computers arrived at the Christian Doity Church on South Western Avenue in Los Angeles last summer, and within three months, 35 children and adults had preliminary training in how to use them.

The learning center at South Los Angeles Baptist Church opened in the fall, and by January the church meeting rooms buzzed with the sounds of more than 20 students and their parents practicing reading, drilling math tables and figuring homework on Monday nights.

"Through Sunday school I found



J. GERRITZ / Tom Drots Rensen

The Rev. Eugene Williams, L.A. Metropolitan's executive director, with Ashton Austin, 5, at schools' meeting

out the children couldn't read or write," said Pleasant, who pastors South Los Angeles Baptist. Members of the congregation, several of them professional teachers, volunteered to help. He asked students whose grades improved with help from the learning center to read their report cards during a Sunday service. When they did, more children came to the center.

Diamond Randolph, 8, a third-grader at nearby Betty Platencla Elementary School, has been doing her homework at the church since last fall.

"I wanted to do better in math, reading and spelling," she said, and she has won a school award for improvement. "I learn a lot of new things here."

Jason Williams, 10, a fifth-grader who admits he has terrible study habits, started at the center in January.

"My momma, auntie and granny come to this church, and I needed help with my homework," said Jason, a student at Centinela Elementary School. "I think I'll do better if I come here."

Such small victories ease the uphill crawl that is part of L.A. Metropolitan's daily life. Last spring, church leaders negotiated hard with school board members in Compton over whether churches can be used as sites for public school programs. Since then, resolutions have been accepted by school administrators in Compton and Inglewood allowing churches and schools to work together.

One recent Saturday morning, LAUSD Board President Genethia Hayes fielded questions from more than 200 parents, many with children beside them. The atmosphere at First United Methodist Church on 100th Street was open and friendly.

Before the meeting, Hayes pointed out that, by law, public schools cannot transport children to churches or promote church programs in schools.

"I absolutely understand the fire wall between church and state," she said.

As in Compton and Inglewood, L.A. Metropolitan has proposed that churches in areas served by the LAUSD provide adult students in need of high school diplomas and that the school board supply certified teachers. Pleasant expects to start such a program at his church in April.

In addition, L.A. Metropolitan congregations want to invite public school students to take part in after-school tutoring programs.

"It is completely appropriate and correct for pastors to pull together and couple the church with after-

school programs," Hayes said.

More typically, public schools offer after-school programs only for their own students, and churches offer them for their members. L.A. Metropolitan is proposing that schools and churches work together for programs open to the broader community. These steps only seem to confirm Williams' basic theory: "We are testing the perception that the church is irrelevant," he said before the meeting with Hayes. But when she left, he made it clear that he is testing more than one perception.

A Feeling of Being Powerless

"The education system in our neighborhoods is under assault," he told audience members, after assuring them that things had gone well that morning. "Remember, we have no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent injuries."

It isn't hard to understand why Williams commands such attention when he speaks. His quiet way, keen mind and experience with the worst of human nature can stop a person mid-thought.

"Twenty years ago I heard J.V. Stoner, the Stone Mountain, Ga., KKK grand wizard, speak," Williams said by way of explaining his passions. "This 'white knight' said, 'If you don't want a black person to know something, put it in a book.' That paralyzed me."

His sense that smaller churches felt powerless to change things turned Williams' attention to their situation. He knows the frustrations of being small at a time when the mega-church system has never been stronger in Los Angeles.

During the last 15 years, Crenshaw Christian Center and its 10,000 members, West Angeles Church of God in Christ and its 14,000 members, and First AME and its 17,000 members have faced the same problems L.A. Metropolitan faces, but they had the means to solve the problems within their own walls. They opened their own schools and formed partnerships with banks and corporations to rebuild the surrounding neighborhoods.

"We have one of the top certifications in the country," the Rev. Frederick Price of Crenshaw Christian Center said about his church academy, which includes kindergarten through grade 12. "Many of our students go on to college." Such benefits are beyond the reach of most smaller congregations.

"In every measure I've seen, African American children are on the

bottom of the barrel," Hayes said of the Los Angeles public school system. The most recent scores on statewide Stanford 9 assessment showed that, in 1999, African American children ranked lowest among identified ethnic groups at the elementary and high school levels.

Of 1,000 possible points, some African American children peaked at 866, yet the highest score for Asian and whites was 973. At the low end, some African American students made 279 points and their median score, 497, also was the lowest. In contrast, the median score for Asian students was 758 with a low of 31. Whites scored a median of 724 and had a low of 424.

Polls show that African American parents see the public school problem as critical. Eighty-three percent rated the school system poor, compared with 63% of white parents, according to a 1997 Los Angeles Times Poll.

"I don't think that African American parents are turning away from public education," Hayes said. "If they're beginning to feel hopeless that we can turn the system around."

Such concerns are not new to the black community. Church historians point out that education has been a priority for African American congregations since the mid-1700s.

"After desegregation in the '60s church leaders said, 'Good, government is taking responsibility for what it's supposed to do. We can relax,'" said Andrew Billingsley, who studied 1,000 black Christian churches for his book, "Mighty Like a River" (Oxford University Press 2000).

Beyond taking matters back in their own hands, he said, congregations should take an essential step further.

"Activist churches need to develop a means to pressure government into doing what is just," Billingsley said.

The moral authority of religious leaders remains a powerful lever for change, Billingsley said.

At a recent meeting, L.A. Metropolitan's leaders agreed on the best means of improvement.

"As pastors of small congregations, we didn't have the resource to reach into the community," said L.A. Metropolitan's president, the Rev. Richard Byrd. "We were busy keeping our lights on and our doors open. But L.A. Metropolitan brings the capacity to get a foothold into the greater world. We've unit for the greater good of the community."

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