



Solutions for MIAMI VOICES: partnering for success

By John W. Kennedy

When Rich and Robyn Wilkerson arrived as senior pastors of Miami's Trinity Church eight years ago they entered a challenged community within Miami's metroplex infested with rats, termites and nightly shootings.

With a core of 200 mostly Haitian churchgoers, the Wilkersons knew transforming the area would take more than a series of well-intentioned sermons.

While Miami is home to some of the nation's wealthiest foreign-born, it also is the debarkation point for a multitude of America's poorest arrivals.

The Wilkersons asked God for a vision to help new immigrants. How could they acclimate people enmeshed in grinding poverty to this country and to Christian values? Nearly two-thirds of the residents of Miami-Dade County were born outside the United States, and many still have an extremely limited English vocabulary.

For the Wilkersons, the solution came via governmental faith-based funding. Since 2000, Trinity

Church, through an umbrella organization called Peacemakers Family Center, has been able to provide social services as a neighborhood resource center. More than 500 people a week receive food, medical care, clothing, legal aid, job training and housing assistance while transitioning from an unstable environment to self-sufficiency.

"They're coming from the Third World and bringing their brokenness and lostness with them," Robyn says. "No one should ever be begging, without a job or without medical care in America."

"When you add faith to social services you see a change in the lives of people," Rich agrees.

The church doubles as a one-stop social services center, where residents can apply for food stamps, utility subsidies, unemployment benefits, child-care assistance vouchers, job placement, disaster relief subsidies, Medicaid, Social Security benefits and Medicare — and meet with a social worker who will counsel them in a substance abuse or family violence situation.

Peacemakers isn't designed to be a welfare safety net for life. Once people receive assistance, the plan is to help them quickly escape poverty.

"We don't want to be a holding tank for poor people," says Rich, a former evangelist and church planter. "Our philosophy is win the lost, help the poor and teach them abundant living."

The strategy is benefiting individuals and families and growing the church. On Sundays about 1,500 people now attend three services at Trinity Church.

Although the original campus still provides social services, two years ago Peacemakers and Trinity moved to much larger facilities in Miami Gardens, a city of 107,000 between Miami and Fort Lauderdale that has the largest black population in Florida.

Church attendance closely mirrors community demographics: 75 percent black, 20 percent Hispanic, 5 percent white. The talented Peacemakers staff likewise includes few whites.

Trinity is known as a place of

hope for the poor, neglected, abused and disenfranchised, a church where ethnicity isn't important.

AURA OF EXPECTANCY

Trinity is located in a former executive office center, with facilities covering 75,000 square feet just on the ground floor.

An aura of expectation and an emphasis on self-improvement are evident while touring the facilities on a recent Saturday morning.

Rich is overjoyed to see scores of congregants shouting praises, raising their hands and clapping in symbolic victory over the challenges in their lives. During a Jericho march, the customary close to the two-hour prayer service, Wilkerson high fives those marching to the beat of "There's No God Like Jehovah."

Trinity Church is a happening place beyond the sanctuary on Saturdays, with various areas offering martial arts, cheerleading classes and English as a second language classes.

As he walks past a tae kwon do session, participants goad the well-

liked Wilkerson into joining them for push-ups. Good naturedly, the 54-year-old Wilkerson drops to the floor and quickly performs 25 push-ups, seemingly without effort to the cheers of the assembled.

Classes in the building are possible because of faith-based funds. Since 2000, Peacemakers has been awarded \$7.5 million in government contracts to assist clients with everything from subsidies for on-site day-care to a 12-week program on how to buy a home with no down payment. In September, Peacemakers received a five-year, \$2.75 million U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant to provide healthy marriage relationship preparation training to teens.

"The government is not the enemy," Robyn says. "If we can provide outcome measurements that are demonstrable and reproducible, the government is willing to provide funds."

The sense of anticipation at Trinity continues during Sunday morning worship, where Jonfulton, the eldest of the four Wilkerson

sons, leads songs accentuating joyful abundant life and triumphant living.

New church members introduced on stage demonstrate what a melting pot Trinity is. Most new members originally hail from outside the country, including the Bahamas, Nigeria, Haiti, Uganda, Puerto Rico and Jamaica.

TURNING IT AROUND

Peacemakers takes a holistic approach to motivating people to accountability. If people are hungry and desperate, it's usually because they don't have a paycheck and need work.

Johansen Aurelus, 24, spent 18 months incarcerated after being convicted as an accessory to armed robbery. Aurelus had difficulty finding work because of his felony record, but Rich found a way to assist.

"So many others out there like me are now dead or locked up because no one cared to give them a second chance," says Aurelus, now a resident specialist at a local rescue mission. "I prayed every day for a job, even though I kept getting rejected."

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Wilkersons on the pastoral team are (from left) Robyn, Jonfulton and Rich.

This church kept me motivated. People here care for me, and I now have a future."

Four times a year, Peacemakers sponsors an "extreme job makeover" day. In the morning, applicants don donated business clothes, receive a facial and manicure, and learn how to write a résumé. Trainers work on honing social skills and interview techniques that can make the difference in distinguishing candidates from the rest of the job pool. In the afternoon, em-

ployers come on site to interview.

"First impressions are lasting impressions," says Shermaine Sacasa, who oversees the extreme job makeovers. "Résumés not done right go straight into the garbage can."

More than 200 people have been hired through the church since the job placement program began last year. Companies looking to fill positions in floor tiling, food service or air conditioning repair constantly are in touch with Peacemakers.

"The word is out," says Sacasa, 38. "Now we have employers calling us."

Indeed, Trinity today includes entrepreneurs who have formed their own companies, people who formerly led gangs or lived on the streets.

Those who attend Trinity are encouraged to participate in discipleship programs. The first steps are weekend events called Men's Encounter and Women's Encounter.

"In this society men have a lot bound up inside them," says James Boyd, coordinator of the men's program. "Men's Encounter allows them to let out shameful, hurtful things like divorce or sexual immorality in their past that have prevented them from reaching their potential in who God designed them to be."

In the intense weekend meetings men weep together, confidentially.

"Emotions transform these men so they become better husbands, fathers and Christians," says Boyd, 48. "They find deliverance through the teaching of the Word of God, with the Cross as the focal point."

Joel Mathis had been attending Trinity sporadically for about six years, but he didn't get serious until a little more than a year ago after he heard Wilkerson preach about Jesus' sacrificial death.

"I should be doing numerous life sentences," Mathis says. "I should be dead a thousand times over."

Mathis served only one year in prison — released when a judge learned he planned to attend Trinity. Mathis credits his mother's prayers with straightening him out with God.

"In the past my philosophy was I'll never live to 25, I might as well do as much as I can," says Mathis, who has made it to age 25. "Men's Encounter showed me I'm able to leave all my baggage behind and Jesus has forgiven me."

Gina McDonald, 32, says Women's Encounter has empowered her. For 10 years McDonald worked in a job she didn't like. Because she had a jail record and had been through a drug rehabili-

tation program, she dreaded the prospect of looking for other employment.

"Through Women's Encounter I realized God loves me no matter what," says McDonald. Through the Peacemakers job placement program she recently landed a social development position with the U.S. Department of Labor. "I've been able to release things that I've kept inside for many years."

Today, McDonald is the picture of poise and confidence. "I don't have to feel ashamed of my past," she says. "I don't have to sit in the back of the church because somebody may know what I've done."

Recently McDonald regained custody of her daughter. She's now enrolled in a God Answers Prayer group at Trinity, the next discipleship phase after Encounter. During 10 weeks of GAP group meetings, congregants learn such disciplines as how to keep chaste and free of addictions as well as how to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

One of those mentoring younger men is Michael Gregory, 58. By outside appearances, Gregory seems to have lived a trouble-free life. He's been a Christian for 23 years and a deacon at Trinity for a decade. He's an actor who has appeared in TV episodes of *Miami Vice* and often-aired commercials for products such as Cingular.

But at a Men's Encounter not too long ago Gregory revealed his traumatic childhood. His legs still bear the scars of the beatings inflicted by a strap from his father's hands. Gregory ran away from home in Jamaica at 15.

By telling of his unpleasant experiences, Gregory hopes to assure younger men they don't have to suffer alone, and encourage them to overcome past stigmas. "People need to let go of their baggage, even if they've been mistreated," Gregory says. "Jesus was rejected, and He went through a lot more than we've gone through." **tpe**

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ARCS OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

A. Admit you are a sinner.

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

B. Believe in Jesus (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

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