

ON THE SOUTH SIDE of Richmond, Virginia, an elderly white couple holds a “Church Yard Sale” sign and waits fruitlessly for customers. In an area populated by weather-worn buildings with rough, hand-painted signs for the “Apostolic Kingdom of Jesus Worshipers,” this couple represents a pristine mainline church with a name handed down for decades. Around them, the community reflects a diverse mix of blacks, Asians, and Hispanics, but the parking lot of the mainline church is populated only by a few white people.

It’s a moment that depicts Richmond well, a city where pylons still stretch up out of the James River to hold a bridge that no longer exists, a casualty of the fleeing Confederate army. Here you’ll find many mainline churches with middle-class, aging congregations. Their homes retreat farther and farther away from the little islands they’ve maintained in the

drug-dealer-turned-Bible-smuggler spends his days telling people how Jesus spared his life from his former employer and how the Holy Spirit empowered him to tell Egyptians about Christ without a translator.

His nights only vary by location. Instead of speaking to the people in his apartment building, tonight he is talking about Jesus to bar patrons. Walker is intimidating and enthusiastic. He is also evidence of hope, a sign that some Christians in Richmond have realized the seismic shift that is happening. Instead of boarding up and taking flight, they are taking the gospel to the people outside.

Pastor Bryan Ogle of Enon Church of God knows about the importance of an outward focus toward a changing culture. Twenty-five minutes south of downtown Richmond, the community around Enon continues to swell. “The church moved to this location eight to 10 years ago,” he says. “Where we are now is more of a suburb of Richmond. There’s a military base

pleshup approach to just having the church go from a smaller-church mentality to a bigger-church one. Changing the mentality of how leaders within the church lead. We are in the process of embracing the culture that will lead us into the future.”

From handing out Gatorades at the local YMCA to hosting a night of camping on the church grounds to offering special seminars and events, the outward gestures to the changing community are already having a big impact as the church grows.

Hope and a Hurricane

Few shifts in culture, however, have been as dramatic as what happened in the wake of Hurricane Andrew in 1992. The vibrant community of Florida’s Homestead Church of God collapsed from about 200 people to 27 following the devastation. Almost overnight, South Miami-Dade County shed 250,000 people who left the ravaged area behind.

It’s a change that Pastor Travis John-

Sharing the UNCHANGING Gospel in a CHANGING World

How two congregations—one in northern Virginia, the other in south Florida—are adapting to new realities by John UpChurch

middle of rough neighborhoods. Tradition holds them there, but it’s doubtful they’ve seen a new believer in years.

Only a few miles from where the yard sale was taking place, a tall steeple casts an impressive shadow across Cowardin Avenue, and you might think this growing mosque still houses a church. Other former mainline churches boast boarded-up windows, graffiti, and orange notices to keep out.

The River City changed, and when those churches wouldn’t budge, the city changed them.

Hope and a Drug Dealer

Walker is not the type of person who would care much about the history of such churches in the city he calls home. The

that’s supposed to triple in size. So, just the culture of the area that the building sits in now is much different.”

Before he arrived, “The congregation had gone through some difficult times. They went through a transition of culture, and some people left. It was a low-morale type environment.”

The first steps Pastor Ogle took reflect the purpose statement of the church: “Love God. Love people. Serve the world.” He opened his home to the congregation, inviting them to learn about the vision God had given him for Enon. From there, he is leading the church through necessary change to better serve the community.

“We’re in the process of not thinking of the church as the way it has always been. That goes from music to our disci-

son remembers vividly. “Over 50 percent of the churches in Homestead closed and did not reopen,” he said. “The demographics radically changed. It was a financial miracle that the church continued immediately after Andrew and especially through the ’90s. The fact that the Homestead Church of God was still functioning in 2003 was testament to unbelievable devotion on the part of the church and my parents, who pastored the church.”

Their example deeply influenced his desire to reach the “new” Homestead. “I’ve never seen such devotion and raw, pure, self-sacrificial ministry that close. I think most people would have left the community for normal lives. My parents did not. They deserve credit for their tenacity and faithfulness.”



“One of the great privileges I’ve ever had was baptizing Kekona Alana, one of our first team members at Life Pointe Church—Plantation Key. After I baptized Kekona, he turned and helped baptize Kanahoe, his older brother, whom he had led to Christ in rather dramatic fashion. The picture of that baptism captures and justifies all the joy and pain that has come with digging out the two Life Pointe campuses.”—Travis Johnson

The church he began leading had around 30 dedicated members, but God gave him a vision to remove as many barriers as possible and to create a “gospel-obsessed community that loves God and man with reckless abandon.” Disaster had changed the city, economic adversity had hardened those in the area, but the need for the unchanging gospel is always the same.

Post-Andrew Homestead needed to hear that message, and Pastor Johnson wanted to make it happen. “We considered ourselves a church replant. We rebranded [as Life Pointe Church], sold property, reopened, restructured, and relocated. In order to do all that, we had to have the buy-in from our church body and from the Church of God state office. The process took several years.”

Pastor Johnson continued, “As we talked about the future, we improved the facility. We simplified everything by throwing away anything that had not been used in a year. We painted, using Starbucks-colored themes. We relandscaped. We were broke, so everything we did was with elbow grease and donated services from new members. The week we painted, we had families show up for the first time saying they had never seen the church before. The physical changes lent credence to and reinforced the vision. As small wins built up, we were able to tackle the greater pursuit of relaunching.”

A New World Outside

According to early results from the 2010 census, the world outside the church

continues to change. Married couples with children account for only 22 percent of all households nationally, and “minorities” are no longer minorities in many places. Three million people have left the Northeast, and the Midwest shed another 2 million—many of them relocating to the South (www.adage.com).

Shifting demographics affect all churches. To share the gospel effectively, churches must reach out to the changing realities as the Enon and Life Pointe congregations have done. Otherwise, the community may increasingly ignore the church and its message. ☪

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