



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

Pastor's Update

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"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." 2 Cor. 13:14.

In a previous update I mentioned that a church the size of Hope is called a "mega-church." Such a congregation worships at least 1800 people on a weekend, of course worship at Hope has grown to about twice that number. There are only about 400 such churches in the U.S. Of course South Korea has one congregation that has membership in the hundreds of thousands, but that is a story for another day.

One of the best learning experiences for people from a mega-church is to visit another mega-church. Sometimes the best learning and sharing takes place between congregations of similar size, because they usually have much in common. With this as background, I found an article in Christianity Today about another mega-church that I found to be rather fascinating. While it is very different from Hope in many ways, there is much that we share. I quote from part of the rather lengthy article: The headline beckoned, "Chicago's Holy Fire, James Meeks may be the most effective mega-church pastor you have never heard of." (The article immediately piqued my interest, even though I have been a rather attentive observer of mega-churches and pastored one for many years, I had never heard of Pastor Meeks.) But according to author Bob Smietana, Meeks has risen from being a relatively unknown South Side pastor to one of the most recognizable and powerful pastors in Chicago.

He has made Salem Baptist Church one of the largest African American congregations in Chicago, growing from about 3,000 to 17,000 members today. Meeks is also an Illinois State Senator, representing five of the poorest communities in Illinois. He is also executive vice-president of Rainbow/Push and has been named as the successor to Jesse Jackson.

Salem Baptist's growth bucks the trend in Roseland, the community where the church is located. The overall population has shrunk by 18% in the past decade, nearly 99 out of 100 residents identify themselves as black, it lacks a sit-down restaurant and a chain grocery store. Residents must drive an average of 40 minutes to and from work each day. Until recently, bars and liquor stores have dominated the landscape.

On weekends, however, people line up an hour early, as if for a rock concert, to get into Salem. Two of the services, 12:30 on Sunday and the Wednesday night service, air on a local television station.

The Wednesday service begins at 6:00 pm, with an extended prayer time, followed by worship songs. The choir, the band, and the congregation stand, sway and lift their hands as they sing. Finally, Meeks steps to the lectern, his well-worn Bible in one hand and a long legal pad containing his hand-written sermon in the other.

His sermon is an unapologetic gospel presentation, based on Ephesians 2. Drawing an analogy from personal computing, Meeks tells his congregation that you cannot enter just any screen name and gain access to God. You can only gain access in the name of Jesus. For the next 45 minutes, with humor and fiery oratory, the stocky minister hammers home the message. "Can't find your calling in life? You need Jesus! Can't find happiness in your relationships? You need Jesus! Tried every religion under the sun, and still can't find peace? You need Jesus!"

Every worship service ends with two altar calls, one for people who want to accept the Lord, the other for people who are "ready to come home," and become members of the church. This night's service ends with dozens of people coming forward during both altar calls. The second altar call reflects one of the themes of Meek's ministry. Everyone has a job to do in the church. He says too many believers miss God's calling in life, convinced that God blesses them for their own benefit.

Salem was started in 1985 by Meeks and 200 former members of another church. In the beginning the church was so poor it could not afford to even pay his salary. Now the congregation can afford to pay the salaries of 177 staff members. By 1990 the church bought a former Roman Catholic Church for \$825,000. As the church continued to grow it started a day-care facility, a counseling center for drug abusers, a soup

kitchen, a ministry to help people get out of debt and a 500 student private school.

Some years ago Meeks helped create a huge new vision, it included a plan to close down all of the liquor stores in the Roseland community, winning 25,000 people to Christ in a yearlong evangelistic campaign, delivering Bibles door to door to the more than 30,000 residents of that zip code, and giving the Bible on cassette to every prison inmate in the state.

From 1997 to 1999, more than 6,000 people joined the congregation, and in 1999 an evangelistic campaign resulted in more than 27,000 people confessing faith in Christ and 3,000 joining the church. Meeks is pushing for economic revitalization in Roseland. As part of his plan, the church led a "Vote Roseland Dry" campaign to close down all of the liquor stores in the community. While the community voted with Meeks to close them down, the owners appealed the case and it is still working itself through the courts.

Still what was once the largest liquor store in the community is now the House of Peace, one of the congregation's three bookstores. A business publication has praised the church, along with Willow Creek Community Church and Saint Patrick's Catholic Church as models of nonprofit management.

The latest vision of Pastor Meeks and the leadership of that church is to build a 32 million dollar, 10,000 seat church combined with a 7,000 seat sport's arena, with three basketball courts and an ice rink, on 23 acres of vacant land. The church has already received zoning approval from the city council and plans to begin construction this spring. Meeks and his high school sweetheart, Jamell, have four children, two of whom attend California Lutheran College in Thousand Oaks, Calif., an ELCA college. Also the article relates that Meeks is an avid Chicago Cub's supporter, like another senior pastor we know and love.

Meek's closeness to Jesse Jackson brings him some political fire. But in the summer of 2003 he was named Jackson's successor, even though Jackson has no present plans to retire. Despite their friendship, it is clear that Meeks and Jackson do not always see eye-to-eye, with Meeks being more conservative. Jackson is pro-choice, Meeks is pro-life. Jackson supports gay rights, Meeks considers homosexuality a sin and would support a constitutional amendment prohibiting homosexual marriages.

Meeks is very much in tune with his congregation. African American congregations tend to be more liberal on a

range of political issues but fairly conservative on moral issues. He also benefits from the specific polity of the African American church. In a white congregation if the pastor announced that he was running for public office, he or she might be brought before the church board. But Meeks stood up one day and said, "God wants me to do this," and everyone stood up and cheered. This is not unusual, almost 10% of black churches surveyed in the year 2000 had a pastor who had held elective office.

Despite Salem's success, the church faces great challenges. Unlike Willow Creek and Saddleback, both located in tiny suburbs, Salem sits in the middle of an impoverished urban area. The neighborhood has the same struggles as any other urban neighborhood, such as gangs, drugs and crime. The local schools are struggling, 65% of the third graders read below grade level. Salem has organized a tutoring program to reach all of the third graders in their zip code. Salem provided 600 tutors to work one-on-one with students. Over 800 students participated. 375 students who had perfect attendance received new computers.

Meeks believes that besides learning to improve their reading, the third graders learned that the church cares about them, that the kingdom of God is relevant in their lives. That's a lesson he believes many students are not hearing from white churches. Meeks says, "Evangelicals need to be careful not to be irrelevant. They will grab one issue, like abortion, and think that because they have taken a tough stance on abortion they have addressed a societal ill. I do not hear the same outcry from any evangelical pulpit about the unequal funding for education among the haves and the haves not. I don't hear from the evangelical pulpit about the disparity of the prison population between blacks and whites."

If white kids couldn't read and black kids could, the evangelical church would address it. If white kids were in jail and black kids were going to college, the evangelical church would address it. His invitation is for evangelicals to partner with other evangelicals to address the social ills. He hopes to persuade African American and white evangelicals to work together. As he says, "the world will never see how colorblind Jesus is until they see how color blind the church is."

Please pray for Salem Baptist Church and all those congregations which are bringing hope and salvation to communities in crisis.