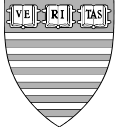

Kennedy School of Government
Case Program

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A Mega-Church Takes on Urban Problems: Fellowship Bible Comes to South Midtown

Twenty-five years after its founding, the Fellowship Bible Church of Little Rock, Arkansas had proven to be an astounding success. The church that had first met in the private homes of its 18 founding members had come, by the fall of 2004, to hold its worship services on a 25-acre campus in one of the best locations in the booming West Little Rock section of the city. Its three "worship centers," each with its own style and approach, attracted a combined 5,000 congregants on any given Sunday. Overall weekly attendance topped 7,500. Fellowship's acres of parking lots were regularly jammed, although there was always room for newcomers in a special section set-aside for them. Its $13 million-plus annual budget allowed the church to employ the most up-to-date technology: lyrics of the contemporary Christian songs sung by its choir and congregation were projected on a large screen for all to see; the main Sunday sermon could be viewed live in all three auditorium-like worship centers simultaneously. Moreover, Fellowship's non-denominational evangelistic approach had attracted many of the city's most affluent young professionals, drawn by dynamic preaching, contemporary music, special programs for children and teenagers, and a broad, engaging effort to serve, in the words of long-time "directional leader" (senior pastor) Robert Lewis, "as an equipping church that calls people up to a responsible life that's tied to eternal purpose."

But as the Fellowship congregation had grown, the leadership of this successful "mega-church"—it had become the single largest in Little Rock—had come to believe that the Christian life must go beyond individual salvation, beyond the responsibilities of family, friendship and individual acts of charity, as crucial as these were. In the "FBC vision," the church called on its members to be "passionately committed to Jesus Christ, Biblically measured, morally pure, family centered, financially faithful, and evangelistically bold." At the same time, however, members were also asked to hew to another principal—to strive to be "socially responsible." Lewis, as the

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"directional leader" of the church, had become convinced that the church was called to undertake "external ministries—"outreach" efforts aimed at improving the spiritual, moral, and physical condition of their city and the world. So it was that, during the 1990s, the church, at one time insular and known chiefly for the harsh criticisms its leadership leveled at popular culture, had changed dramatically. In its effort to become what Lewis had described as a "church of irresistible influence," Fellowship Bible had taken the lead in organizing a massive citywide day of volunteer projects.[1] In addition, ministries that had originated in small groups of church members—such as a sexual abstinence education program held in dozens of public and private schools—had taken on an independent life as well-known free-standing organizations. Such efforts were made possible, in part, by charitable contributions made by Fellowship which totaled more than 25 percent ($3 million-plus) of its annual spending.

Yet despite such apparent success and influence, Robert Lewis had, by early 2003, become concerned both that the external ministries of the church were too limited and that they lacked the sort of focus that would continue to energize the large congregation—which could, he feared, begin to feel disconnected from the church. It was in these contexts that the leadership of Fellowship Bible, in the spring of 2004, was considering the possibility of undertaking the most ambitious "external ministry" in its history—a project that could, over time, engage hundreds or even thousands of church members and make a clear mark on the Little Rock community. The focus of the efforts would, the church leadership decided, be a neighborhood with "significant physical needs." This would, in all likelihood, mean that this affluent, white evangelical congregation would be seeking to improve a lower-income neighborhood in the older, inner city parts of Little Rock, a city whose white population had once been synonymous with resistance to civil rights for blacks. Ultimately, the church would conceive of what it called the South Midtown Project—also known as the "one church, one school, one neighborhood project"—as the way it would focus its efforts. Fellowship hoped that its assistance would demonstrably and measurably improve life in one of the city's most troubled areas—a 130-block area of central Little Rock. It would be, said Lewis, "a huge risk but one we have to take. And we have to succeed."

Fellowship Bible: History

The idea of taking on an ambitious project that was in many ways unlike anything the church had done before could, ironically, be understood as part of Fellowship Bible's tradition—a tradition of ongoing change. Indeed, the church was born in the college campus ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and its leadership had, from the outset, taken as its mission that of bringing a new energy to contemporary evangelical Protestant Christianity. Pastor Robert Lewis traces the roots of the Fellowship approach to his exposure, when he was a student and football player on a national championship team at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, to the well-known

[1] Robert Lewis with Rob Wilkins, "The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community," Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001.

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group, founded in 1951, called Campus Crusade for Christ. Lewis, who was raised in what he calls a "non-church" family ("I could count on one hand the number of times I went to church when I was a kid"), was drawn, through Campus Crusade, into a congregation near the university which he saw as a sharp contrast to the staid hymn-singing and dull sermons—without reference to contemporary issues and personal struggles—he associated with church-going.

Recalls Lewis:

> There was a local church there. University Baptist Church, the pastor was H.D. McCarty. He was what I want to call a guy ahead of his time. It was the '60s, but rather than a traditional church, his church was nestled right on the campus of the University of Arkansas, you just walked right into it from campus. But he decided when he came there, as a young guy from Dallas, he decided that he was going to connect with college students in a relevant way, so he changed the way he preached. He engaged the issues of the day with the Scriptures. And he scrapped all the music and went with a real contemporary musical style. And you almost had to stand in line to get into church. But he was very engaged in a church that was relevant to where people were. And so, I always say that what happened during those days for us, we were just these impressionable college students, there were several things that we experienced. We experienced community, we experienced relevance, and both those ministries (University Baptist and Campus Crusade for Christ) knew how to engage the broader community." Lewis was also struck at how Campus Crusade, in particular, used entrepreneurial business methods—such as loaned corporate jets used to fly him and other "Razorback" football players to personal appearances to promote their role as Christian athletes.

His college-age experience would prove to be the model on which Lewis would build when, in 1980, he returned to Little Rock—after having attended the Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon and completing graduate education in psychology, to complement his undergraduate focus on financial management—and took on the leadership of the fledgling interdenominational, evangelistic congregation called Fellowship Bible. The church met, at that point, in a school gymnasium. By the mid-1980s, Fellowship's approach had made it the fastest-growing church in Little Rock, drawing in a congregation made up in large part of the growing group of young professionals emerging as part of the long-poor state's growing "New South" economy. In this—and in its location in the fast-growing newly-developing areas of the city, Fellowship was representative of the successful, new mega-church. [2]

[2] "If size is a crucial element in the definition of megachurches, region and placement in a city create the context. The national distribution of megachurches reveals a clear pattern. Over 75 percent of these congregations are located in the Sunbelt states, with nearly half of them in the southeast region. Megachurches (are) clustered around those metropolitan areas which were among the fastest-growing in the country. … These churches are primarily

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At first, the Fellowship experience meant a focus on what Lewis calls the "spiritual": the individual decision to become a Christian (to be "born again"), to renounce bad habits and irresponsible behavior. The church, recalls Lewis, was "inward-looking," taking as its mission that of being a community in which its members could find salvation and grow as disciples of Christ. Says Lewis: "We were defining what life is about, how life is to be lived from the Scriptures, and that would go down to instructions on marriage, parenting, purity, morality, all those kind of things." However, this inward-looking church was, Lewis continues, "clueless as to how to engage the community. So we went through a series of trial and error approaches."

Early Engagement: The Anti-Pornography Campaign

As it ventured out of its own cocoon, Fellowship Bible—although it always engaged in some "compassion ministries" to help those in need—at first understood much of its mission to involve pointing out the problems it saw in the secular society around it—specifically, practices that it understood as symptoms of moral and spiritual decline. So it was that, in 1985, when a local, politically liberal "alternative" newspaper called Spectrum began to accept advertising with sexually-oriented content, Robert Lewis—having failed to convince the publisher privately to cease and desist—mounted a high-profile public boycott campaign.

Lewis recalls the chain of events: "I just called the editor and said 'hey, I don't mind necessarily your social views, even though I don't agree with them, but your paper is in every business establishment in Little Rock, and the stuff that's being displayed there for families, is just, obscene. And I said, surely there's got to be another way to fund the paper than just to do that kind of stuff. And, of course, he kind of basically told me where I could go, and laughed at me, said I was a white fundamentalist, and all that kind of thing. So, I said, I don't even think you understand who we are, but the point of the matter is, I don't think that's good for our community. And so I formed a small group to expose what they were doing. We said, don't speak as a Christian, speak as a citizen, you're a citizen of Little Rock. We just said, when you go into a business establishment and you see a copy of Spectrum, pick up the paper, while you're having dinner there, call the local manager, and then open it to the back page and say, do you support that? And so, we did that. We put them out of business in three months."

located in prominent places on highly-visible tracts of land. They are generally near the expanding edges of the city, within easy access of major highways. … " Scott Thumma, "Exploring the Megachurch Phenomna: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, from the author's doctoral dissertation, "The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory: Megachurches in Modern American Society," Emory University, 1996.

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Repentance

Perhaps surprisingly, however, this signal success left Lewis feeling not triumphant but concerned and downhearted.

> I remember meeting with the church elders one day and saying, 'you know, we're missing something Biblical, something spiritual. We're missing something.' And that was really the kind of turnaround for me as the directional leader. I just began to look at the Scripture and began to see again how Jesus connected with all types. He was so good about it. And then I started reading about the early Church, how it connected in the first three centuries, in particular, when it was the persecuted minority, and yet it did grow. They recognized that they were in a decadent society. But they responded by loving that society. Not by critiquing it. We came to recognize that we were alien to the community. The fact was that even though our church had grown so large, even though it was such a dominant size in the community, we had no healthy connections with that community. Finally that picture became so clear that it was hard not to notice it. And I think we did notice it and we repented of it. I got to tell you, I went before the whole church and said, I don't think we're doing it right.

Lewis would later put his thoughts this way:

> We are reconnecting with a long-neglected part of our Christianity: the part that believes that the Great Commandment to 'love your neighbor as yourself' (Mathew 22:39) is just as essential to the spread of the gospel and to the sanctification of church members as the Great Commission (Mathew 28:18-20) … I believe it is impossible to be personally sanctified without 'love and good deeds' (Hebrews 10:24). Moreover, 'faith without deeds is dead' (James 2:14-26).

Lewis, though admittedly "clueless" about how to engage the larger Little Rock community, did develop a strong view about paths to avoid. Specifically, he would distinguish external ministries which Fellowship might undertake from the mainline Protestant tradition known as the social gospel, a philosophy which dated to the turn of the 20th century and referred to the belief that committed Christians who addressed themselves to improving the social conditions they encountered, could overcome sin and create a socially just world. Among its key texts was *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1908), in which author Walter Rauschenbusch wrote that: "Nations do not die by wealth but by injustice. In the last resort, the only hope is in the moral forces which can be summoned to the rescue." Thus, the church had an obligation not to focus only on spiritual matters but, rather, to engage the issues of the day—such as the living and

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working conditions of the poor—and advocate for both personal steps and government policies that would ameliorate them.

In Lewis' view, the social gospel was a subtle apostasy—for it held out the possibility of creating a Kingdom of Heaven here on earth At the same, time, he believed that it was important to engage the community through external ministries. He, too, believed strongly that the inward focus of the evangelical movement (the "gospel of proclamation")—itself in part a reaction to the social gospel as practiced by established "mainline" Protestant denominations—had to be augmented by "humble acts of charity, strategic community concern and sacrificial works of service." He sought, therefore, to overcome conventional views of what he freely called the "religious Right"—"a name associated with nonloving confrontations, judgmental pronouncements and self-righteous invitations to be more like us." Faith, instead, he believed, required acts of love and kindness to ameliorate suffering and encourage morality and responsibility. In contrast to the social gospel, however, Lewis believed that the external ministries of the church and its members were the result of God working through individuals. His was a theology that was thus more likely to lead to volunteer approaches to the problems the church saw around it, rather than to advocacy for government action or policies, or the establishment of secular social service programs. The gospel of "proclamation," wrote Lewis, must be augmented by the gospel of "incarnation."

Common Cause Groups

So it was that Fellowship Bible came to play a new and different role in Arkansas' capital city. It would not entirely cease to call attention to societal trends which it considered morally wrong—including, for instance, in the fall of 2004, what it viewed as attacks on traditional marriage and family structure represented by the legalization of same-sex marriage. At the same time, starting in 1988, and over the course of the 1990s, members of the church were strongly encouraged to establish or join external ministries. They responded. Many of Fellowship's 7,500 regular attendees volunteered at established Little Rock organizations and began to start their own projects, as well. The congregation was already divided into dozens of small groups which met, outside church, in members' homes, in part to discuss issues which arose in each others' personal lives. With the move toward "i-squared" (the church of irresistible influence) model, these small "common cause groups" were encouraged to find ways to volunteer in the Little Rock community. The church, for instance, sponsored a "jobs fair," at which established nonprofits (such as the Red Cross) had booths. Over time, however, this approach proved less fruitful than the development of entirely new ministries, which emerged from the common cause groups—and, in some instances, developed into new independent, nonprofit organizations, although still financed in part by the church.

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Many of these Fellowship spin offs became well-known parts of Little Rock community life, although they were not directly associated with the church in the public mind. These included Little Rock's "Run for Your Lives" road race, which was established to raise funds to send inner city minority children to summer camp but which developed into a high-profile event distributing some $350,000 a year to charities serving the poor—including an ultra-modern community center and gym established by a former professional football player from Little Rock;[3] STEP a teen mentoring program for children of North Little Rock's Eastgate housing project, and a sexual abstinence education program (*Abstinence by Choice*) which arose in response to one member's outrage that a Little Rock public school teacher had endorsed the distribution of condoms to teenagers and which Robert Lewis describes this way:

> Jim and Connie Phillips were the ones who started Abstinence by Choice. Their kids went to a Christian school, he had never ever done anything in the community. He was an accountant who was scared to death of the world. But when he took his kids out of Christian school and put them in a public school and began to work with the principal, he saw so much promiscuity and so many single-parent families that he helped start a ministry with his wife. It was to provide mentors for the kids in that junior high age bracket, and provide what he called an abstinence-based training in that mentorship so kids could have an alternative from the rampant promiscuity there. He and his wife labored there real faithfully for four years and got some other couples involved and the principal saw so many results in this program that he started telling other schools. Fast forward to 2004 and they're in every middle school in central Arkansas.

In addition to these sorts of ministries—typically led by a small number of committed members of the church—Fellowship continued to seek ways to engage large numbers—thousands—of its members with the larger community. Beginning in the mid-1990s, it began to build a way to do so. This vehicle for voluntarism would come to be known as ShareFest, an annual one-day event in which volunteers from a consortium of evangelical churches throughout the city—known as the Nehemiah Group[4]—took on neighborhood clean-up and improvement projects on a grand scale. The ShareFest force of volunteers grew, over a five-year period, to include some 4,000 volunteers. By 2003, Fellowship alone was spending $50,000 for the one-day event and contributing 1,000 volunteers, involved in 40 projects; they cleaned-up vacant lots, repaired homes for the elderly poor, painted and removed graffiti from schools, and even assisted (through Habitat for Humanity) in the construction of new homes for the poor. Increasingly, however, the ShareFest focus was on physical improvements at the Little Rock public schools—whose Central High School was famously racially desegregated in 1957 only with the help of

[3] The program known as P.A.R.K. (Positive Atmosphere Raises Kids) was established by former professional football player Keith Jackson.

[4] Nehemiah was an Old Testament figure aggrieved over the condition of Jerusalem and sought to rebuild it.

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federal troops, but, more recently, had become overwhelmingly black and poor. With ShareFest banners and publicity visible throughout Little Rock, the volunteer festival brought Fellowship (notwithstanding the fact that it did not put itself forward as the sole sponsor) clearly into an alliance with the city's political leadership.

Robert Lewis recalls taking the big step of asking Little Rock Mayor Jim Daly, whom he did not know at that point, to speak to volunteers at the beginning of the first ShareFest.

> We had a guy that went to our church that was on the (City Council) and he just asked Jim if he would show up that day just to say a word to us. I imagine he thought it was another conscience-relieving thing that a wealthy church would do with maybe 50 people and that it was no big deal. I think he agreed just for the political exposure—but I think he was blown away when 1,000 people showed up.

For many in Little Rock, Fellowship, indeed, would become synonymous with ShareFest. Observes Little Rock City Manager Bruce Moore:

> I think, outside of the religious community, Fellowship is mainly known for ShareFest, and this is one person's opinion, but because they did just a tremendous job with it, and were able to impact a lot of lives, I think that that was their kind of introduction into the community.

Even as ShareFest became a prominent sort of civic celebration in Little Rock, however, Robert Lewis began to grow dissatisfied with this form of church social responsibility. A one-day event was useful, Lewis observes, "but what about the other 364 days?" His concern about the sustained effect of the effort of so many volunteers echoed the conclusions of a report commissioned, in 2000 by the Nehemiah Group—"modeled on the actions of (the Biblical) Nehemiah (who) in a time of national struggle and spiritual crisis united his people in a strategic work which transformed their city. History records that prior to developing a detailed strategy, Nehemiah personally surveyed the city." Notably, the report—based on a survey conducted by a market research firm—included the findings:

- "There is a wide gap between needs identified in the community and the availability of programs in churches designed to meet those needs."
- Churches tend to allocate only about 5% of their budget to local ministry programs
- Racial division continues to be a major concern in our community, particularly in the area of education. Clearly race relations and education are two areas where community leaders would like to see more church involvement.

The report suggested, too, that by not addressing common community concerns, churches were limiting their effectiveness in reaching the "unchurched." "Central Arkansas may be an 'unchurched community. National statistics suggest 4 out of 10 people regularly attend church. As

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part of the 'Bible Belt', one might expect central Arkansas to exceed this number. However, estimates were that regular church attendance in Pulaski county is between 20% and 40% of the population." Indeed, the leadership ("elders") of Fellowship Bible was concerned about its own research which appeared to show that its members' level of engagement with church activities began to plateau and then wane, after five years.

One Church, One School, One Neighborhood Emerges

With all this in mind—including the limits of ShareFest, his concern about engaging the congregation, and the mismatch between church efforts and community concerns—Robert Lewis went off, in January 2003, for his annual personal retreat to a remote cabin the Arkansas' Ozark mountains—a trip known in the church as Lewis "going to the mountain." Recalls Lewis:

> I set off to think over, 'what's the next key move? 'I just felt like we needed a focus, that we're getting too scattered. That we had great groups out there, but the groups weren't connected. That we needed to do something that allowed people to have a model, I'm real big on building a model you can actually implement … creating workable models that other people can replicate.

Lewis was particularly struck by the fact that other cities, including Atlanta, had begun to pick up the ShareFest approach—a fact which reinforced his interest in designing yet another approach to social responsibility that could serve as a model for others.

Lewis' retreat served, each year, to kick off Fellowship's internal planning process for a new set of initiatives that would be announced to the congregation in August in an annual state-of-the-church address from the pulpit. Lewis describes the process this way:

> I'd just spend some time getting quiet, listening to God as best I could. … What I'm trying to do is come up with the next major initiatives of fellowship, or the next major needed improvements to something already going on. And I list those, and the elder board waits for me to come back. And I'm not coming back like Moses coming down from Mount Sinai. I don't have the Ten Commandments. I come back as best as I know how with my gifting, to share what I believe God is putting on my heart for us. And then we go into the planning process in January. And the goal is to come to a unity. And a unity so that when we have the state of the church address, we can say that we're presenting to you is what we believe God has put on our hearts.

Lewis came "back from the mountain" with a recommendation that Fellowship find a way focus its variety of efforts it had already initiated to improve life in low-income parts of Little

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Rock. His suggestion: to focus the voluntarism of the congregation on the long-term improvement of a single low-income neighborhood of the city, and to start with an intensive effort to provide mentors from the congregation for children in a single elementary school. The project would be known as "one church, one school, one neighborhood."

Fellowship did not lack for lively discussion about the idea amongst its elders. Indeed, at first, Lewis' suggestion met friendly resistance, particularly from one of his closest long-time aides, fellow minister Ray Williams, the church elder in charge of "mobilization of church partners"—as such, the key person behind the Nehemiah church consortium. Williams was concerned, among other things, that the idea was too modest for a citywide effort. "I told Robert," recalls Williams, "why not something like a mentor for every child in Little Rock who needs one?" Lewis, however, was insistent that such an approach might not only outstrip the capacity of the church to provide volunteers—but would not have the compelling focus that would allow the church to work toward a specific goal—the improvement of one identifiable community. As Lewis puts it:

> We were doing good things, but if you marshal all our resources, take all our small groups, and then bring them all to one part of town, you create a model that can really change a part of the city. We can create another model at a higher level, so that other churches can say, 'we can do that.' We can show you can take a little bite off, because what most evangelicals feel is, on the front end, you can't go to the world. And, secondly, if you do, it's overwhelming. Well, we're trying to answer those questions. We're not going to change the whole world. We're going to change a part of the world. But let's change a significant part of the world that can create a model that can infect everybody else to change their little part.

The scale of the project was not the only concern which Ray Williams and other members of the church elders had, however. They were concerned, as well, that the church was getting involved in something that looked a lot like a government-style social program, of the sort on which countless billions had been spent in recent decades, even as, by some measures, the problems of poverty—in particular the rise of women having children out-of-wedlock, a particular concern of the church—had become worse. Nonetheless, as they discussed the idea of focusing on one single neighborhood—in all likelihood a poor, predominantly black neighborhood in central Little Rock—Williams and others came to believe that, in some sense, they could not fail. Says Williams:

> Whether or not in five years we would witness a transformation in that neighborhood, I don't know. That's a huge, ambitious goal. But, you know, we believe we're serving a great God, and so, I would say that the thing that is different about what we're trying to do (compared to) some social programs, is that we will bring a component of serving a God who, as an expression of our relationship with him, has called us to love others.

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> And we're willing to do that if nothing happens. If five years from now, that neighborhood is not physically changed, we haven't experienced all of what we've hoped for, there still will be spiritual change taking place in the lives of people there and in our lives.

Or, as Robert Lewis puts it, "My goal is to reach the hearts of the individuals in that community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and create a rebirth there."

Picking "South Midtown"

The decision to focus the church outreach efforts on one school and one neighborhood, did not, however, resolve a key question: which neighborhood? There were many older parts of the city which were predominantly poor and black and in rundown physical condition. Some 18 percent of all Little Rock families with children under age five, for instance, were classified as living in poverty. There were many census tracts in which the number of single-parent households outnumbered those in which married couples were raising children. Significant portions of the city were plagued by an open drug trade and gangs, boarded-up housing, and schools in which the majority of children were not meeting the competency goals on standardized tests.

In choosing the neighborhood, Lewis recalls:

> I told Ray, I have two concerns. One is the size. When they first came back with a suggestion, I said, now, that is that too big. I said, let me tell you, guys, if we do this we must succeed. Because if we don't, we're not going to create hope. The other is, I'm a little concerned that we might be choosing an area that is so economically and educationally deprived that it's going to take 20 years to make the difference, and that it's going to wear us out. I was looking for a little bit more moderate middle ground, where we could run further faster with the people in that area.

There were other practical considerations in choosing a neighborhood, as well—including its relative proximity and convenience to the Fellowship membership in West Little Rock, so as to facilitate the movement of volunteers. The church also sought a school principal considered to be a strong leader and a well-disciplined, albeit low-income, student body.

With these constraints in mind, the elders of Fellowship Bible chose—in the spring of 2004—to focus on the Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, a school of 380 students in the middle of a 130-block area of a neighborhood known as South Midtown. Some 75 percent of students in the K-5 school were enrolled in the federally-subsidized free or reduced-price lunch program; 70 percent came from single-parent homes and only 10 percent of parents were estimated, by principal Ethel Dunbar, to participate in parent-teacher activities. Only 21 percent of students were

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"meeting or exceeding expectations" on the Arkansas Benchmark Exam standardized test in mathematics for Grade 4. More than 98 percent of the student body was African-American.

However, Franklin and its surrounding neighborhood were attractive to Fellowship for reasons beside the extent of its need. Important members of the school's staff, including principal Dunbar, were members of two prominent neighborhood African-American churches (Highland Park Baptist and Hoover United Methodist) Fellowship regarded the development of partnerships with neighborhood churches as key to the long-term success of its plans. (There were 14 predominantly black churches in the neighborhood altogether.) Moreover, South Midtown was by no means the worst neighborhood in Little Rock. As was typical in Little Rock—where many white students attended private academies—the public school population was more poor and more predominantly black than the neighborhood as a whole. On South Midtown's western border, the lower middle-class Oak Forest area was a relatively stable residential neighborhood where employees of the nearby University of Arkansas at Little Rock lived. (In fact, the blocks nearest the school were the best-off in the entire census tract.) North of South Midtown was a major interstate highway (I-630) which made it convenient to drive to a series of major hospitals and medical research institutions, including Little Rock's Children's Hospital, considered among the region's best. (The same highway made it possible for residents of West Little Rock, where most Fellowship members lived, to get to south Midtown in about 15 minutes.) A staff member at the City of Little Rock Planning Department describes the neighborhood as "an area on the up rise—very affordable for first time homeowners and a very central Little Rock location." Even the news about the school itself was not entirely bleak: the number of fourth-graders "meeting or exceeding expectations" on the standardized state reading test had risen from 15 percent in 2001 to 53 percent in 2002.

Still, census data for the larger neighborhood within the 130-square block target area surrounding Franklin Elementary underscored that South Midtown was hardly without significant problems: the population of the census tract in which the school was located had fallen from 5,270 in 1990 to 4,497 in 2000 (including 849 white and 3,458 black); single-parent households (with children under 18 years old) significantly outnumbered two-parent families (376 to 240). Although median household income was $27,468, some 1,303 of 4,468 households were considered to be below poverty level in income. And nearly 10 percent of all housing (178 of 1,959 structures), dominated by small bungalows built in the 1920s-1940s, was vacant. Many homeowners were elderly; although their mortgages were paid off, they found there were virtually no new homebuyers interested in the neighborhood, making it impossible for them to sell their homes, if they wanted to move. Many were thus forced to stay in older homes and had difficulty maintaining them. Nor was shopping convenient. The neighborhood's 12th Street commercial area, once considered the main street of black Little Rock, was notable for a shopping mall with numerous vacancies. And crime was a significant problem: by one estimate, the Midtown area generally (including more than just the 130-block area on which the church would focus), was home to just 10 percent of Little Rock's population but accounted for 40 percent of its murders.

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Making the Model Work

The idea to focus its volunteer efforts on a single Little Rock neighborhood was just the beginning of Fellowship Bible's consideration of how to make the one church-one-school-one neighborhood model work. Over the course of the spring and early summer of 2004, they would hone the details of the plan and begin to discuss it with school and neighborhood leaders with whom they might work. Church elders envisioned an effort that merely started with the mentoring of dozens of individual children. Franklin principal Dunbar hoped to start the 2004 school year with up to 40 mentors, each of whom would volunteer for an hour each week, spending a half-hour with each of two students. The church-school relationship would require the approval of the Little Rock Public Schools but this was considered a formality. Fellowship had provided small numbers of mentors to Franklin and other area schools in previous years and had a good relationship with the school system's Volunteers in Public Education program, a division of the school system which regularly advertised for tutors and mentors (especially males). Volunteers were required to refrain from any direct mention of religion, or any effort to convert students. But Fellowship understood the efforts of its mentors to be "faith-inspired," not an overt form of evangelism and thus saw no problem in agreeing to such conditions.

Says Fellowship's Ray Williams:

> We are very careful to not in any way engage in any activity that might be misunderstood as a violation of the separation between church and state. We want to respect and honor that concern. We don't want the principal to be in an awkward place. I would not, while mentoring a student, initiate discussion about religions. Now, if while I'm mentoring, a student starts talking about spiritual things, I'd have a normal conversation like you'd have about any area of life. The key here is that we are there to serve the school and the students, not to provide any kind of religious instruction.

At the same time, Williams by no means foreclosed the possibility that the work of church volunteers will help make the message of Christianity attractive. "I think that as people of faith we are called to serve others, no strings attached. I think that is part of the message of Christianity. At the same time in doing that I hope that that we will attract people to the God who loves us and that those we are serving."

Williams understood well that lining up dozens of volunteer mentors would not necessarily be easy. When, in April of 2004, the church—as it was discussing the nature of the South Midtown plan—began discussions with Franklin and was asked to provide 15 mentors for the balance of the school year, it took considerable effort to line up volunteers, even for less than a full school year. There was, notes Williams, something of a "fear factor," for volunteers being asked to work in an inner-city neighborhood with which they were unfamiliar. The church was,

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however, able to find enough mentors—in the process impressing Franklin principal Dunbar and forging bonds with some of the children. One of the volunteers was church member Scott Worthington, who both volunteered his own time and arranged for other volunteer mentors, notwithstanding the fact that he and his wife had three small children and that, as a salesmen, he had to travel frequently on business in the region. His motivation stemmed in part from his own family's history.

Says Worthington:

> From a personal standpoint, I'm under no illusion that we're going to fix all the problems in Little Rock. That's just so lofty that I can't imagine what it is. But from a very personal standpoint, my dad was at Central High School in 1957 when they shut it down, because of race issues. And my dad had some, and still does to some degree, have some very harsh thoughts about East Little Rock, if you will, or about the black community. And the black community has some very harsh thoughts about the white community, especially white West Little Rock, and there's a big divide. And if I can do one little thing in my lifetime and make that divide be a little bit smaller, I will have been somewhat successful. And I'm under no illusion that we're going to go into the area my father grew up in—because that's where Franklin is—and that it's going to be the grandeur place of Little Rock again. But at the same time, I do believe that, a little bit at a time, if one life sees a different life, a whole mentality changes. It may take 50 years, it may take four generations, but things are changing, and they're changing in a generation that I can identify with, just simply from Central High School in 1957, to me today. And that's my dad, and my mom, and me.

The Larger Plan

In Robert Lewis' vision, school mentoring would serve both as an end in itself—to improve student performance and provide a volunteer opportunity for church members—but also to serve as a means for Fellowship to raise its profile in the neighborhood and gain the confidence and trust of residents and local churches. Both would be important in helping Fellowship to realize its larger goals: what could be called the physical and moral reconstruction of south Midtown.

Robert Lewis—who himself had experienced a very difficult childhood in which father had been an alcoholic—emphasized strongly the central role of strong, two-parent family, and marriage as a bond between a man and a woman, as the basis of a healthy society. Indeed, the idea of family was central both to Fellowship's view of what makes for a healthy society and to its theology, as well. Becoming a Christian meant joining the family of God, who was Father even to

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those who had no family of their own. The church that had blossomed in the new suburbs of Little Rock saw and described itself as a warm and welcoming family.

Lewis had written several books about the crucial importance of fathers in the lives of boys, including "Raising a Modern Day Knight" and "Rocking the Roles: Building a Win-Win Marriage. He had also designed what he called a Men's Fraternity program, already in use at Fellowship and seven other large, predominantly white churches. Lewis felt it particularly important to develop working relationships with South Midtown's many black churches—in order to influence their pastors to promote the importance of marriage and family, as well. "All it is," says Lewis of the program, "is just helping young men learn how to be a responsible man. But it has Biblical reinforcement that encourages them in that regard."

Lewis had long been frustrated by what he viewed as hesitation on the part of the black church in promoting marriage and male responsibility—a hesitation he understood, in part, as an understandable reluctance to appear to be criticizing women, many of whom were raising children on their own, and who often comprised the majority of neighborhood congregations.

> Here is where the frustration is. I know these guys (black churches) can do it. But what I feel like is that we get stuck on is the big-church, small-church problem. The big churches don't get stuck on this. We'll borrow from each other. But there is a complex in the small church about borrowing anything from a big church, because it's somehow seen as an acknowledgement of failure. And that's compounded when it's a black church borrowing from a white church, OK?

So Lewis hoped that mentoring children might lead both to direct contact with their mothers and to indirect influence on neighborhood ministers, who might take up the message of abstinence until marriage and of male responsibility. Fellowship also hoped to introduce its "life skills" program, which included practical household financial management. But the South Midtown model also included what urban planners might call a "bricks and mortar" component—the construction of new, relatively inexpensive-to-buy ("affordable") housing in the neighborhood, such that upwardly-mobile two-parent families would have a place to go and a reason to stay.

Ray Williams explains the thinking behind the idea of new housing construction by tracing the potential trajectory of the volunteer-led effort:

> We come to a young person's school and build a relationship with them through mentoring. We get to know the family. We find out the mom is very smart and articulate but she's just never had the opportunity to get the training that would give her a good job, so we help her do that. And she gets a really good job, and now she's making really good money. I

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> would predict that right now, as soon as she has an opportunity, she's going to get out of that neighborhood.
>
> So you can't have transformation in that neighborhood until you have an environment there where people would not want to automatically move out, if they could. So how do you do that, we don't know yet. But how do we create an environment where people would at least stay and eventually would want to move in. Because, you know what? There's a freeway corridor that kind of divides it, but you're only five minutes away from the University of Arkansas's Medical Center, from the Veterans' Hospital, five minutes from downtown. There could be a lot of good reasons, if the infrastructure and other things were right along there, that someone could choose to live there.

This housing construction part of the South Midtown project called into play a different side of Fellowship—a sophisticated business side, led by Mike Robinson, the head of Fellowship's "Community Strategies" arm. Following his 2002 early retirement from Little Rock's most prominent accounting firm (he describes himself as a "recovering CPA"), where he'd specialized in agri-business tax policy and gained an international reputation, Robinson set about applying sophisticated financial skills to church business. He had, for instance, brokered a deal through which the owners of real estate in West Little Rock gave the church an option to build a new "campus" there—but were also protected, through a complex mechanism, against any financial loss should the church decide not to exercise that option. Robinson would seek to turn this same sort of financial acumen, along with a wide network of contacts in Little Rock's business and political communities, to work in the cause of improving South Midtown. "I like to think," says Robinson, "that being a compassionate conservative means something." In South Midtown, Robinson envisioned a "land bank" of property which the church, using both its financial resources and contacts throughout Little Rock, would help to make available for for-profit and nonprofit developers in south Midtown.

Key to Robinson's vision of new housing in South Midtown was Fellowship's relationship to the neighborhood's Hoover United Methodist Church—ironically, itself a "mainline," politically liberal institution. Hoover was the African-American church which had done the most to seek to reach the most troubled population in the area (drug addicts and alcoholics, returning prisoners, and the homeless), in part through financial assistance from the City of Little Rock, which allocated more than $3 million of its own tax funds citywide each year to various agencies and churches for what it called its Prevention Intervention and Treatment program (PIT). Much of that spending was concentrated in the south Midtown area where, among other things, it supported a community center, housed in the Stephens elementary school, where there was after-school homework help available for students. Hoover United Methodist—which Rev. Robinson had taken over in 1980 when it was all but abandoned and had rebuilt it to becoming a congregation of 250,

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with an array of social service programs. It also had a nonprofit spin off known as Black Community Developers, which had—by making use of the federal low-income housing tax credit program as well as a substantial previous donation from Fellowship Bible itself—already built 12 new homes in south Midtown and had plans to build 14 more. The new homes were concentrated on a single block, which the Rev. William Robinson, Hoover's pastor, saw as the best way to start to improve the neighborhood. His vision appeared to overlap with that of Fellowship. Says Rev. Robinson:

> What we're doing, in terms of getting people to become first-time homebuyers, is to give that new ray of hope to persons within the community. We have a credit program where it helped them fix their credit so they can go to the bank. So this is not rental. We want people to stay in the community and rebuild it and to have something attractive that will draw people back. It will come out of an approach that takes a given territory, geographic area, and begins to build within that area. Not scattered sites all over it, model blocks of improvement that can then begin to spread.

Mike Robinson's plans for South Midtown were even more extensive, however. The head of Fellowship's Community Strategies envisioned enlisting the Little Rock city government to use its power of eminent domain to condemn large numbers of substandard properties—up to 50 percent of all the land parcels in the 130-block area—to allow for new housing construction. Some 50 percent of such new housing, in Mike Robinson's plan, would be designated as "affordable" and thus within reach of current neighborhood residents. Using the power of eminent domain—through which municipalities purchase property, with or without the consent of its owner, in order that it might be used for public purposes—would mean, however, making sure that there was "clear title" to all the land involved. In South Midtown, many real estate parcels had multiple owners—including heirs and absentee owners who had little involvement with the property. Many parcels had longstanding tax liens and other "clouds" on the title.

Mike Robinson, however, planned to arrange for the in-kind contribution of legal help from one of Little Rock's top law firms, in order to jump start new construction in South Midtown. An offer to do so impressed Little Rock City Manager Bruce Moore, who was both interested and grateful. Says Moore:

> We learned a long time ago in municipal governance, that it takes more than one entity to get things done. It takes the community-based organizations, it takes the faith-based organizations, it takes the private sector. And I'll tell you, the day Mike came by my office and brought (a partner in a major Little Rock law firm), it was such a different type of meeting, because usually we're meeting with somebody from a community-based organization that needs additional resources, and

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> they're coming to us to say, help us engage the private sector. In Fellowship's case, I was just impressed that, they'd already done their homework and knew some of the challenges. They were saying, you know, we're not going to give the city another obstacle to overcome. Here's how we're going to help overcome it.

A View from the Neighborhood

In Mike Robinson's plan, Rev. Robinson's Black Community Developers would be a key church partner. In discussing his ideas with the Hoover Methodist pastor, however, Mike Robinson found that Rev. Robinson was unconvinced that widespread demolition and clearance would be the best approach to improving South Midtown.

> If they were looking at the possibility of coming in and developing a whole section, development for a whole section within this community where there were already houses and people there, and people who had been here for quite a period of time, would have to displace somebody because it would be like dozing and starting all over again, I would tell them to go slow on that. That's a good model, it works in, in a wooded area but it's not necessarily good to come into the inner city and displace persons 70, 80 years old to start basically all over again. Even though they may get a reasonable amount for their property, to go back and starting all over again, the displacement is not something that we felt like that, you know, we want to be a part of.

Rev. Robinson was also not sure whether black churches, even were they to take up Fellowship's message of marriage and male responsibility, could affect family structure in the neighborhood.

> I think the churches around here already preach that. They preach that, and they preach that. I think there may be an assumption that that's not going on, but I think that's the general message every week.
>
> But, at the same time, there's just so much other stuff out there that a person has looked at through media, TV, movies, and just other men's lifestyles, and women's lifestyles, that appears to be glamorous, and they get caught up in that whole piece. You go back to Luke 14, prodigal son, what have you, you know. Like his father taught commitment, but, you know, he looked at all the grass on the other side and it looked greener. And he went after, chasing it. So I think the commitment is the key to that. We agree on that. And, I can tell you, I don't know a minority church in the community that does not preach that on a weekly basis.

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> But I think that the expectation of happiness has been skewed to the point where a person does not necessarily want to go through the necessary struggle. If I have don't have all of this up front, and if I can't afford this from day one, then I'm just, I'm just going to lay back and do just the opposite. We live basically in a permissive society and that permissiveness now has been in the majority.

Rev. Robinson was also of the view that there were seldom-considered legal obstacles to stable two-parent family life in South Midtown. He pointed especially to the legal prohibition against hiring convicted felons for many sorts of jobs—including jobs at the hospitals in close proximity to the Midtown area. The fact that so many area men, in particular, had served time in prison—especially for drug-related crimes—convinced Rev. Robinson that such laws needed to be changed.

Overall, however, Rev. Robinson was not averse to continuing his ongoing relationship with Fellowship Bible—to the extent, he stressed, that their purposes overlapped.

Next Steps

As an announcement about the "one church-one-school-one neighborhood" initiative was set to be made in Fellowship Bible's main Sunday sermon in mid-August, 2004, the church elders knew they faced key challenges. They would have to recruit enough mentors to have an impact at the Franklin school—and to serve all the children the school identified as being in particular need. They would have to gain the cooperation of the city in moving forward the project's real estate plans. And they would have to build bridges to black pastors in the 130-block South Midtown area.

None of these challenges, however, stood in the way of Fellowship going forward with its official announcement of the one church-one school-one neighborhood project. By the time it did so, Robert Lewis, although he continued in a senior role, was no longer the directional leader at Fellowship, nor the minister who spoke most often on Sundays. The challenge of presenting the new initiative to the congregation fell to a new directional leader, Tim Lundy, a dynamic young minister who sought to make clear the project's importance.

In mid-August 2004, at the annual "state of the church" address, Lundy introduced the new initiative. In the context of a sermon which stressed the importance of living a life that is "aimed" not "aimless," Lundy discussed the "new model" of "extending the reach of the church." He urged the congregation to overcome any skepticism it might have about the potential for the church to create an "island of health," in which single-parent families and poverty would, within five years, begin to decline.

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"You may look at an area and hear statistics about how long the problems have been entrenched and say, 'it will never change'," said Lundy. "Can we really change marriages and crime statistics, help people get better jobs? It's easy to give up." But the young pastor compared such skeptics to the "professional mourners" whom Christ encountered when he came to the tomb of Lazarus. "It's too late," they told Him, "he's been dead four days. And Jesus said, 'have faith; just move the stone. And He raised him."

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