

Bridging the Divide

One night tested the commitment of two churches - one black, one white –
to pierce racial barriers

By Jennifer Garza
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Pastor Kent Carlson has to know. He stops the head usher and asks how many worshippers have arrived for the church service.

It will be a full house tonight, the usher answers.

Carlson is senior pastor of Oak Hills Church in the Folsom foothills. He's standing in the lobby of the Center of Praise, a black church in Sacramento. What he really wants to know -- but doesn't ask -- is how many of his white congregants will join him there, how many of them made the 30-mile drive on a Sunday evening.

Bishop Parnell Lovelace, pastor of Center of Praise, taps Carlson on the shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he asks. "Are you afraid they're not going to show up?"

He can't resist teasing Carlson. Still, Lovelace understands, as only a best friend can, the significance of the evening. He feels it, too.

The two church leaders laugh and head into the sanctuary for the worship service that, in a way, has been 15 years in the making.

That's when the two preachers -- one black, one white -- made a commitment to break down racial barriers at their churches. That's when they began their mission to bring their congregations together -- worshippers who share beliefs but not cultures, separated by distance and color.

This night's service will reflect how they've done.

It began on a summer day in 1991. Carlson had just finished reading a magazine story about how African American pastors feel estranged from the white evangelical community, and it made him think.

He was head of one of the largest congregations in Folsom, but on that day he realized that he did not really know one African American pastor.

As he thought about his 1,800-member church, he felt uneasy. Nearly every member was white.

More than 40 years earlier, Martin Luther King Jr. said it was appalling that the most segregated hour in America was at "11 o'clock on Sunday morning." Sadly, thought Carlson, this was still true. Most people still choose to worship with people who look like them.

Carlson felt a wave of guilt.

This is not what heaven is going to look like.

The church members were good people; they welcomed worshippers of all races. He knew this. And they were doing what they were supposed to -- serving the people who lived in the community, and there were few African American or other minority families in the foothills at that time.

Still, he knew they could do better. He knew he could.

The pastor closed his eyes.

"Lord, send me someone who can teach me," he remembers praying. "Someone who could be my friend."

Two weeks later, Carlson walked into a conference for church pastors in Sacramento. He saw an African American man dressed in an impeccable navy blue suit carrying his King James Bible.

Carlson introduced himself and knew his prayer had been answered.

Bishop Parnell Lovelace learned from Oral Roberts how to be a positive person.

When he was a child, Lovelace never missed the evangelist's Sunday morning TV show, "Expect a Miracle," and would emulate Roberts' preaching style. Lovelace would point at the TV and repeat the preacher's catchphrase, "Something good is going to happen to you!"

He needed to believe these words. Lovelace lived with his mother and four brothers in the Foothill Farms area of Del Paso Heights. They were among the first African American families in the neighborhood. Shortly after the family settled in, a stranger drove by their house and yelled a racial profanity.

But they stayed. Lovelace accepted Christ at the age of 7 and later attended Oral Roberts University, where he nurtured his dream of becoming a preacher.

In 1989, Lovelace started Center of Praise Ministries in a south Sacramento living room with 12 other people.

Shy and soft-spoken one-on-one, Lovelace was a different person when he preached. The church was growing, drawing new members every week.

But Lovelace was not satisfied.

The pastor had tried to build a diverse congregation, but so far, his efforts had failed. White visitors would come but they wouldn't sign up.

Other African American pastors had told him this was a well-known "secret" of the ministry -- white people do not want a black pastor.

But Lovelace believed differently.

As an African American boy, Lovelace had responded to a white minister. Now he was a preacher himself, looking to reach out to other ethnicities. He knew it could be done.

The conference could be a start.

One week after the conference, Carlson called.

"Hey, want to go to lunch?"

The two learned they shared a passion for Chicago sports teams (the Cubs for Carlson, the Bulls for Lovelace), an interest in drama and similar goals for their churches.

They had long talks about race, ministry and worship. They had different styles, different customs.

Take the white handkerchiefs.

In African American churches, Lovelace explained to Carlson, the preacher would lead his congregation into a rich spiritual exuberance so that the worshippers, roused by the sermon, pulled out white handkerchiefs and waved with the message.

"It's their way of saying, preach on," says Lovelace.

Shortly afterward, Lovelace was speaking at Oak Hills. Five minutes into his sermon, he caught a flash of motion. He looked up. The congregation was waving the handkerchiefs.

"I loved the intention," says Lovelace. "But I hadn't even warmed up yet."

Their friendship deepened over the years and so did their desire to make a difference. The pastors took turns preaching at each other's church.

"To be honest, one of the few times you see black and white preachers together in Sacramento is on Martin Luther King's birthday," says Lovelace. "We wanted to go further than that."

In 1996, the two pastors decided it was time for their congregations to join their conversations.

"Why wouldn't we discuss the elephant in the room?" asked Carlson.

The pastors arranged for a weekend retreat for 50 men from each church. The theme of the weekend was breaking down racial barriers to become more Christ-like.

There was no road map, no how-to guide. They had never heard of other churches doing this.

"We were this all white-bread, middle- to upper-class community, and they were this black urban church," says Carlson. "We knew it would be interesting."

They spent months planning the agenda, going over every detail, making sure men from both churches had equal responsibilities.

And then, on the first day of the retreat, it nearly fell apart.

The movie ended. No one said a word.

They had sat in a darkened room together for 90 minutes, watching "The Color of Fear," a 1994 documentary on race. Eight men in the film of various ethnicities discussed race in a raw and honest manner that made this audience uncomfortable.

Gino Skulick, a longtime member of Oak Hills, had suggested they see the movie. He had heard about it at work and thought it would help.

"You could feel the tension on both sides," Skulick said.

They broke into small groups. An Oak Hills member questioned whether the experiences in the movie were true. A Center of Praise member countered that the man from Oak Hills was living in a fantasy land -- this is what he had experienced his whole life. Back and forth it went.

I was passed over at work because of race.

I'm not a racist.

Frustration boiled over. A few wanted to leave, end the retreat, go home.

"Here we were, a group of Christian men who share the same beliefs, but when it came to race, people were conflicted," said Michael Wall of Center of Praise.

The pastors wondered, How could followers of Christ let skin color divide them? God help us.

The next day, the men from both churches worshipped together. At the end of the service, they washed each other's feet, as Jesus washed the disciples'.

The humble act wiped away the tension.

"That's what it took for everyone to really see each other differently," said Skulick.

They left with a commitment to reach out to one another.

"Something was happening there and everyone could feel it," Skulick said.

The music director at Oak Hills called her counterpart at Center of Praise. "Could you teach us your style of music?"

And so began an exchange of ideas between the churches. Center of Praise members taught Oak Hillians -- as they call themselves -- gospel music. Members of the Folsom church guided the Center of Praise administrative staff on running a large church. By now the church that had started in living room had more than 1,200 members.

The pastors didn't preach about race so much as they preached about social justice issues like homelessness, hunger and reaching out to those with HIV and AIDS.

Carlson was convinced his church was becoming too consumer-oriented. So church leaders began focusing less on entertainment and more on becoming transformed and addressing social justice issues.

It did not go over well. Members left, donations plummeted and eventually church workers were laid off. Sunday attendance fell to about 1,000, almost half of what it had been a few years before.

Carlson turned to Lovelace. "Being a pastor can be lonely; sometimes the only person who understands is another pastor," says Lovelace.

Lovelace also had felt God was pushing him.

The Center of Praise pastor and his church leaders were looking for a bigger facility to accommodate their growing congregation. Many wanted to move to the suburbs, but Lovelace felt God was sending them in the opposite direction -- downtown.

"Everybody told us it was a mistake to go to downtown Sacramento," says Lovelace. "They said there was no parking there."

Eventually, Center of Praise moved downtown and the Oak Hills turmoil ended. Through their trials, the congregations grew closer, though the two pastors didn't talk as often as they would have liked.

"But we knew -- everyone at our church knew -- that they would be there in a minute to help us if we needed it," says Carlson. "They became family."

And that is why tonight is so important. You can't disappoint family.

Carlson has asked his church members to drive to downtown Sacramento for a combined Sunday evening worship service with Center of Praise but is unsure how many will make it.

How will it look if only a few show up?

So when he and Lovelace walk into the sanctuary on this Sunday evening as the praise band is in full crescendo and the worshippers are swaying to the music, Carlson shouts.

"I told you they would come!"

More than half of the worshippers are from Oak Hills. Lovelace laughs as the crowd cheers and several worshippers wipe away tears.

Lovelace leads the congregation in the opening prayer. As they lift their arms in the air, the believers create a black and white tapestry in the 968-seat sanctuary.

"This," says Lovelace, "is what heaven is going to look like."