

# Rescued Church Rescues People

BY PETER K. JOHNSON



With five Sunday services and nearly 2,300 worshippers, International Christian Center (ICC) in Staten Island is now the largest Assemblies of God New York District church. But a decade ago, ICC faced almost certain extinction.

Negative circumstances had caused the congregation to dwindle to 100 members. Financial problems meant foreclosure seemed imminent.

Yet when God intervenes, the impossible occurs. Speaking at the annual New York District Council meeting in May 1998, General Superintendent George O. Wood, who was general secretary then, challenged the audience about the need to plant churches in New York City.

The message stirred Russell Hodgins, pastor of a 300-member AG church in rural Medina, N.Y.

“God hit me like a ton of bricks,” Hodgins recalls. “It was a burning bush experience.”

Sobbing at the altar that evening, Hodgins says he sensed God calling him to leave his comfortable surroundings and go to the metropolis.

Three months later, Hodgins received an invitation from the New York District office to pastor ICC. District officials were forthright about the many challenges.

Hodgins’ family was firmly planted in the Medina community and did not want to leave. He owned two horses with his wife, Lou Ann, and loved competing in rodeos.

Unable to shake off the Holy Spirit’s prodding, he joined ICC as senior pastor in October 1998. His plan for the church was simple: Preach Jesus and love people.

His step of faith opened a floodgate of unexpected events that eventually led to financial victory.

Today most of the debt has been repaid. In addition to the financial victories, the bigger impact that ICC is making deals with changed lives.

District Superintendent Duane P. Durst calls Hodgins a high-energy preacher who is thoroughly Pentecostal.

“They had to rebuild the pulpit

platform because it bounced when he jumped while preaching,” Durst says. “He leads a wonderful worship service where there is great liberty.”

Hodgins connects with the multicultural congregation.

“I feel most cared for and loved here,” says Nadia Antoine, a Black-American from Grenada. “There is no time to see whether your brother is brown, black or yellow. The Holy Spirit has you focused on Jesus.”

“Prayer is a vital part of our ministry,” Hodgins stresses. Besides regular prayer at the altar, members gather Fridays for a prayer and healing service. On the third Friday of every month, hundreds of followers pray until midnight.

“Because of this church, my way of praying to God has changed,” Antoine says. “I have learned that God is able to do what He has promised.” Antoine says her teenage daughter was healed of complications from a serious arthritic condition in 2008 and funds came through recently at the last minute to

save her retirement home from foreclosure.

Vincent Rosario is representative of the several hundred people who are converted annually at ICC. Invited by a friend who is now his wife, he stumbled into a service in 2006 addicted to heroin and pills. For 25 years his life was wrapped up in drugs, robberies and spraying graffiti on subway cars and buildings.

“I didn’t believe in nothing,” he says. He fled that Sunday service cursing but challenged by the Holy Spirit. Living in a shelter and attracted by the free food, Rosario accepted an invitation to an ICC men’s breakfast. He responded to the pastor’s salvation message muttering, “I’m going to give this thing a shot. God has to take me away from drugs.”

Within a few days he says the Lord delivered him from his drug habit, and he began attending ICC regularly.

“Jesus means everything to me,” he says. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Him. I’d probably be buried somewhere.”

He joined the church’s maintenance crew two year ago and works on the outside grounds, picks up trash and cleans restrooms.

“I could make more money somewhere else, but I do my job unto the Lord,” he says. “That’s what gives me joy.”

Rosario loves sharing his life’s story. He has changed the meaning of his old street name, *BASIC*, from “beat all suckers in competition” to “bring all souls into Christ’s kingdom.” He recently completed the Berean course on hermeneutics and broke down in tears when he received a passing grade.

“The Lord helped me do it,” he says.

The church employs a full-time staff of six pastors and enlists 1,000 volunteers in various ministries. For example, Alberto Cruz heads a 40-member volunteer security force, a growing necessity in large churches, especially in urban settings.

“It’s a big-time blessing,” he says. “I love what I do because

everybody feels secure with us on duty.”

Cruz and his staff head off potential incidents but also evangelize newcomers and help those in trouble. One Sunday he spotted a woman pacing anxiously in front of the building. He found out she was depressed and on the brink of suicide. The woman committed her life to Jesus, and she now attends the church.

ICC’s outreach has expanded to include a satellite service in the St. George area of Staten Island and two churches in Monrovia, Liberia. Plans are under way for another Staten Island location.

“We are raising up leaders to plant additional churches,” Hodgins reports. “I have learned if you follow the call of God, He will make a way. He is faithful to the end.” **e**

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