

By John W. Kennedy in Philadelphia

Sanctuary IN A CONCRETE JUNGLE

Philadelphia church conquers vices, one step at a time

It's mid-afternoon Friday at the corner of Margaret and Ditman streets in the Frankford section of Philadelphia. Pastor Richard A. Smith is preparing for an open-air tent revival, the third night of an eight-night revival to be held in the yard of Faith Assembly of God.

Across the street, on the stoop of a boarded-up mom-and-pop grocery store, a sprawled-out figure catches Smith's eye. A middle-aged white man, shirtless on this 90-degree August day, has passed out. A near-empty 1.75-liter bottle of vodka sits beside him.

Smith, a pastor who has ministered in rough areas of Philadelphia for a quarter-century, walks across the street and rouses the man.

"I want to die," the hungover man tells Smith.

"God doesn't want that," replies the compassionate pastor.

Within a few moments, Smith, a young-looking 55, has convinced the man not only to regain the will to live but to pour the rest of the vodka in the gutter. Smith hollers at a parishioner to bring some beef jerky from the church so that the inebri-

ated neighbor gets some food in him. Smith invites the man to services that evening and picks up the empty container.

"It will make a good object lesson for a sermon later," he tells me.

Ministering to alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes and the homeless is an everyday occurrence for Smith, whose own father left the family before Richard reached grade school. The 190-strong congregation is full of people who have turned their souls over to Jesus after forsaking one life-controlling force or another.

People respond to Smith — who has no paid staff — because he shows genuine concern for their needs. Faith Assembly of God feeds, clothes and shelters the poor people in Frankford. Some obtain the services and go their own way. Others stick around to learn more about what motivates such loving-kindness.

Smith, who is also a nationally appointed U.S. missionary, is compassionate, yet anything but bashful. He knows spiritual warfare keeps a stranglehold on the finances and behavior of so many nearby residents. The army-like camouflage fatigues he wears are emblazoned with the slo-

gans "Freedom in Jesus" on the front and "God Squad" on the back.

Faith AG's annual tent crusade, held every August, demonstrates that the church is a place where the hungry find food, the poor get help to pay for utilities, and the addicted gain freedom from drugs. Smith and his congregation offer repeated evidence that faith, diligence and mentoring provide a way out of a cycle of poverty and despair.

It's a ministry built on much more than sermons. Faith AG provides holistic outreaches ranging from job referrals to parenting classes.

"We just want to win souls to Christ," Smith explains. "We want to bring church outside the four walls."

GOD'S SANCTUARY

A chain-link fence topped by three rows of barbed wire envelops Faith Assembly of God. The church has been in this location, a former warehouse, for five years.

The stifling afternoon sun has given way to a cool breeze by the time today's service gets under way.

After worship, the evening gathering incorporates a modified version

of a Jericho march. Instead of walls falling at the blast of trumpets, Smith leads the congregation in praying outward for the neighborhood surrounding the property. The pastor herds attendees onto the sidewalk in front of the church and, through a megaphone, offers fervent prayers.

Smith is bold, but not arrogant. He shouts to the football players practicing on a field east of the church; to the row house residents hanging out on their porches to the south; to the curious onlookers who have gathered to gawk on the west and the north.

Smith prays for students and teachers returning to classes; for the homeless, drug addicts and alcoholics; for those bound by gambling and prostitution; for people contemplating suicide in the Delaware River; for federal politicians and local officeholders in the City of Brotherly Love.

In an environment where the opposition is mighty and the results are slow, a pastor might be ripe for burnout. Yet Smith's broad smile and gregarious laugh belie the reality that the church has experienced outdoor lighting vandalism, broken windows and a stolen sound system.

Smith's church office contains unadorned furniture, including a computer that has seen better days. Smith pauses to answer one call after another, several from people looking for rides to tonight's service.

The tug for the soul often begins via a grumbling stomach. Before service, a free meal featuring grilled hamburgers is available. Those who stick around until the end — and nearly everyone does — are rewarded with a frozen Philadelphia dessert known as water ice.

In between is a revival meeting that runs 3½ hours. The tent takes up much of the asphalt front yard of Faith AG. There are seats of various colors, styles and sizes for 150 spectators. Casually dressed people trickle into the tent, usually arriving on foot. Several young moms have babies in tow. Free canned goods and used clothing are available on tables.

MATERNAL INFLUENCE

Smith's mother, Mary, serves as assistant pastor. She conducts a pre-service intercessory prayer meeting. Mother Smith, as she is affectionately known to the congregation, is 77 but looks closer to 50. The sweet-

spirited, affable woman says she answered God's call to preach in 1971 — after being healed of grapefruit-sized tumors that caused doctors to give her up for dead.

More than half a century ago, Mary's husband walked out on her when she was expecting their third son. She raised those sons in Detroit by herself. Today, Ellis and Gerald Smith are Pentecostal ministers in the Motor City.

If residents driving or walking by somehow miss the erected tent and banners advertising the crusade, Mary Smith's clarion call is sure to snag their attention. The normally soft-spoken woman prays energetically near the sidewalk, loudly calling upon God to do battle in the area.



Pastor Richard A. Smith

Sanctuary **IN A CONCRETE JUNGLE**

Richard Smith says he sensed a call to preach upon being baptized in the Holy Spirit in a small storefront Church of God in Christ congregation at age 14. He began ministering in Philadelphia in 1980 while still a student at nearby Valley Forge Chris-

the residence to make it secure. Smith is hoping the house can be reopened.

Smith gives people ministry responsibilities as a way to build their self-worth. Many haven't worked a legitimate job in years. Regina Johnson, one of the women helped, now

Perry expresses great loyalty toward Smith.

"Pastor is a dynamic preacher, but also a phenomenal teacher," Perry says. "He took Greek long enough to read it, and he has great recall."

The tent services are filled with

Bruno says of the pastor. He recalls how Smith invited him to a hot lunch at a time when Bruno hadn't eaten for two days because he had wasted all his money on drugs.

"God let me know I was worth more than crack," Bruno says.

sees on the street to the revival. An unchurched boy who lives down the street agrees to come to the Saturday night meeting. Smith calls Malcolm before the crowd at one point, commends him for attending and prays for him. The pastor realizes the boy's

opening worship, Malcolm has grown fidgety. He gazes across the street.

"Could you take me to the park to play football?" he asks.

Like many other little boys, Malcolm faces a choice growing up in

"I stopped giving my welfare checks to the drug dealer. I want to let you know you can live free from sin. You have a choice not to put that needle in your arm." — Dorothy Whitfield



Scenes from a revival: (From far left) Richard Smith's daughter, Jeanne, on keyboard, leads worship; Edward Bruno and Mary Smith; teen girls perform a worship choreography; Smith leads a prayer march around the church.

tian College, the Assemblies of God school in Phoenixville.

Smith believes violence, illegal drugs and other vices can be overcome if Christians live out the gospel. He says those who join the cause are faithful in giving, as well as volunteering for church duties.

"It's the joy of my life to see men and women be responsible and be a resource for God," Smith says.

CHANGING THE AREA

Smith met his wife, Rosilyn, in North Carolina, where he preached in tent meetings before moving to Philadelphia. Rosilyn is a psychiatrist whose income pays the family bills. Smith puts all of his small monthly salary back into church causes.

The Smiths have one child, 28-year-old daughter Jeanne, a registered nurse who is married to an accountant. In June she gave birth to the Smiths' granddaughter, Joslyn.

Richard and Rosilyn live in a modest house only a few blocks from the church. They bought the home at an auction for \$1,000. The Smiths also purchased the residence next door with their life savings of \$5,000. It currently houses 13 homeless men trying to get their lives back on track. "These aren't a bunch of bums," Smith says. "They've just hit hard times."

In the past decade, Faith AG has housed 30 destitute mothers and 120 children. The church took over a former crack house after Smith convinced the city to shut it down. But the three-story women's home closed two years ago due to lack of funds. The Smiths had invested \$5,000 into

donates time to the church's food ministry. The tall, slender woman initially came to the church in 2000 to find food for her children.

"I had three kids, was pregnant and living in a shelter," she says. "The night before, the kids didn't eat."

Smith located a one-bedroom apartment for Johnson, who now has a job, car and house. Johnson, 34, is project director at an agency group home.

FAITHFUL HELPERS

A distraught Ray Perry wandered into Faith Assembly of God 22 years ago when he heard congregational singing. He's been at Smith's side ever since as the church's volunteer administrator. A white-haired, toothless white man of 67, Perry figures he should have died three times. He's survived a grueling 10½-hour operation for rheumatoid arthritis, a potentially fatal bout with meningitis and skin cancer surgery.

Doctors told Perry he needed the surgery for arthritis or he would die — and even if he consented to the procedure, surgeons gave him only a 40 percent chance of walking again. He had to give up his job as a manager for a doughnut chain. Alcoholism resulted, in a daily pattern of excessive gin and beer drinking as well as cigarette and cigar smoking.

Before the arthritis operation — which involved inserting a steel rod in his back and cutting bone off his hip and pelvis — Perry prayed to God for the first time in many years. That's when he found Faith AG.

"I'm still living, and I'm still walking," he says.

a variety of music, all amplified by massive speakers pointed in different directions. It's *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance* and *America's Got Talent* rolled into one. A group of boys barely old enough to read are singing. Adult women get a turn, followed by a men's trio. Most of the regulars wear camouflaged "God Squad: On Duty for Jesus" attire.

Each night those who are part of the congregation and have been redeemed convey spellbinding testimonies.

Dorothy Whitfield, 42, recalled how she first attended Faith AG because of the food ministry 19 years ago.

"I went from one crack house to another," she says. "I would buy cocaine instead of Pampers for my baby."

That year's tent crusade took place a couple of months after she started attending church. Smith preached that people didn't have to be bound by drugs, and Whitfield says when the pastor prayed for her at the altar, God immediately delivered her from the seven-year addiction.

"I stopped giving my welfare checks to the drug dealer," says Whitfield, who now manages a restaurant. "I want to let you know you can live free from sin. You have a choice not to put that needle in your arm."

Edward Bruno, 54, director of the Faith AG men's home, tells how God transformed his life through Smith.

"He didn't see the crack head, he saw the soul who was hurting,"

REACHING KIDS

Smith has a heart for kids, who are drawn to him as a father figure that many don't have in their own homes.

"Some of the kids the church has helped out are in jail or abusing drugs," Perry says. "But when they are in trouble they come back. We've had people come to the front door bleeding from gunshot wounds."

Smith is always inviting people he

destiny is in the balance.

Malcolm is a friendly, good-natured, slim 9-year-old living with his mom and various siblings. He decides to return for the regular Sunday morning service.

"I'm so hungry I could eat dirt," Malcolm tells the pastor before the service begins. Smith finds some snack cakes to feed him.

As we sit on chairs awaiting the

Frankford: whether to follow the tug of the Lord or succumb to the lure of temptations elsewhere.

It's Smith's unending mission to keep Malcolm and Frankford's next generation responding to that divine tug. **e**

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E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.



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