

The word on the streets: Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship. Judith Malveaux. The New Orleans Times-Picayune. July 11, 1997.

The Times-Picayune

JULY 11, 1997

FRIDAY

161ST YEAR

FULL GOSPEL BAPTIST CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Steven Hixon, an elder at Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church, listens closely as a man speaks Thursday at Canal and Basin streets.



THE WORD ON THE STREETS



Ronald Armstrong, an evangelist with New Christian Valley Church in Chicago, talks to a young man waiting for a bus on Canal Street. "With spiritual food, you don't keep it to yourself. You have to take it and use it, give it out to somebody else," Armstrong said.

STAFF PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ZDON

Baptists keep the faith alive to save souls

By JUDITH MALVEAUX
Staff writer

They gathered in a circle on the neutral ground near the junction of Canal and Basin streets and began singing, a small island of spiritual serenity amid the Thursday afternoon hurly-burly of Downtown New Orleans.

People think Christianity is just a religion and it's not. It's about having a relationship with Jesus Christ."

FRED BUSIL, minister-in-training

Fortified by their singing, the five men and women then broke into groups of two and three and headed off, as they have every day this week,

"This is the day the Lord has made," they sang. A few curious bystanders stopped to listen; most people hurried past, dashing to catch a bus.



Beryl Armstrong holds the hands of Clifford Brown as they pray. On Monday a team of youth evangelists went to the St. Thomas public housing complex, and on Wednesday a team went to the C.J. Peete Community Center, where evangelism was combined with a health fair offering blood-pressure screenings, guidance on nutrition and information about cancer.

See STREETS, A-4

CONTINUED

Streets: Baptists pound pavement

From Page 1

to perform a task that is close to the heart of their Baptist faith: spreading The Word.

"It's like when you eat and don't do anything, you blow up and become fat," said Ronald Armstrong, a member of the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship's evangelistic team, explaining the group's sense of mission. "With spiritual food, you don't keep it to yourself. You have to take it and use it, give it out to somebody else."

Encountering a youth perched on a litter barrel waiting for a bus, Armstrong shifted into evangelism's confrontational mode.

"Look at you," Armstrong said. "You're just sitting here waiting on that bus. What's your name?"

"Ryan," the youth replied.

"Ryan, do you know God?"

"I believe in God. I just, I don't go to no church."

"Did you wake yourself up this morning?"

"I know. God woke me up this morning."

"Well, I believe he's gonna be there for you. He's gonna be there always, but you have to believe. That's the beauty of being saved."

And then, telling those who had gathered around to "watch for his bus," Armstrong led Ryan in prayer.

Saving souls is not the only purpose of the sidewalk evangelism. Bishop Paul Morton of Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church said it also spreads awareness that the fellowship has been convening all week at the Superdome, 50,000 members strong.

The evangelism hasn't been limited to Canal Street.

On Monday a team of youth evangelists went to the St. Thomas public housing complex. Twenty-five souls were saved, said H. Daniel Wilson, bishop of evangelism for the conference. Seven were saved Tuesday when the adult team went to Duncan Plaza.

On Wednesday a team went to the C.J. Peete Community Center, where evangelism was com-



Saving souls is not the only purpose of the sidewalk evangelism. Bishop Paul Morton of Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church said it also spreads awareness that the fellowship has been convening all week at the Superdome.

STAFF PHOTO BY JENNIFER ZDON

bined with a health fair offering blood-pressure screenings, guidance on nutrition and information about cancers that organizers said take an excessive toll on African-Americans for lack of early detection.

"We're not only concerned with their spiritual life, but also their physical life," said Elder Steven Hixon, pastor of evangelism for Greater St. Stephen Church. "Jesus ministered about dealing with the total self," he said. "A lot of people can't afford to get this done so we bring it to the community."

Despite Wednesday's torrential rain, ministers-in-training Christopher Thomas and Fred Bush ventured away from the health fair for a round of evangelism as productive as it was wet.

"How y'all doing?" Thomas said, approaching a group clustered in front of a corner store. "Did you hear about the health fair across the street? It's free." Most shook their heads; others ignored him.

"Well," Thomas said, his smile

never failing him, "we want you to know that it's there and God loves you."

He then shook each person's hand and continued on down a wind- and rain-whipped Washington Avenue.

Bush stood back as Thomas strode through a river of water coursing across a basketball court to reach a group of eight women huddled in a schoolhouse doorway, trying to keep dry.

"He's very dedicated," Bush said, watching admiringly as his colleague set to work, trying to melt the women's reserve with talk of Jesus.

"The hardest thing is explaining the difference between religion and relationship," Bush said. "People think Christianity is just a religion and it's not. It's about having a relationship with Jesus Christ. It's about understanding the grace of God."

In front of the schoolhouse door, Thomas was breaking through, winning a response from the at-first-skeptical women.

"We all could be gone in five to 10 minutes," Thomas said. "The greatest thing to do is talk to God. He knows about your problems. He knows if you're strung out. All you need to do is say 'God, I need your help.'"

"That's right," said one of the women, warming to Thomas' off-the-cuff sermon. "We try everything else so why can't we try Jesus?"

Bush joined his colleague to tell the women how God had saved his life. "I grew up in these projects," he said. "If you love Christ as much as you love the world, he will change you. I'm a living testimony."

After praying with the women, the two evangelists returned to the center to catch the end of the health fair. Christian rapper Eddie Velez had just finished a guest appearance when thunder shook the building, the electricity cut off, and the room went dark.

"God is good," Thomas said without missing a beat, and within five minutes the lights came back on.