

The Pastors of Gateway to Heaven Strive to be Agents of Change

By Steve Dimattia

At an age in life when most folks are thinking about slowing down, Carlton Jones, Walter Johnson and Michael McConnell have instead elected to jump into action.

The three men, all 62-years-old and each a respected local pastor, have joined forces to create Gateway to Heaven Christian Church. Rather than rock away their remaining days in quiet repose, they have chosen to use the wisdom and good will accumulated through years of living and preaching in the Jacksonville area to minister to those in need.

“When you’re young you think you have plenty of time to meet all your goals. But when you’re 62, you’re a lot more focused. I can never see myself retiring, so I embraced the idea of true ministry,” said Jones, who will co-pastor with Johnson while McConnell serves as mentor.

It is a focus on ministry and a commitment to education that will set Gateway to Heaven apart from traditional churches.

“We want to teach people how to fish,” Jones said, referring to the adage that if you give a man a fish, he eats for one day, but if you teach him how to fish, he eats forever. “We want to teach them how to change their life through education.”

That education, first and foremost, begins with the Word of God.

“That’s got to be the main focus of our church,” Jones said. “Really breaking down the Word. Not just giving quick sermons, but dissecting them so people know the meaning of the Bible’s more complicated words and concepts.”

The natural extension of this is to teach people how to be good disciples. In particular, Jones feels that a crucial element is showing people how to extend the traditional concept of tithes and offerings to include time.

“No one talks about giving back your time as a way of serving God. We’ll teach and use that,” Jones said.

It is a concept that is very familiar to the church’s ministers.

While Jones may be best known as a developer, entrepreneur, publisher of *The People’s Advocate* and managing partner of Gateway Town Center, he has also worked extensively with not-for-profit organizations and has been preaching for nearly 20 years. A Washington, D.C. native, he came to Jacksonville in 1988 after first developing Palm Coast.

His non-profit work includes serving as chairman of the board of War on Poverty,

an organization devoted to building stronger communities through economic development and education.

His quest toward growing a church around the practice of ministry began two years ago when he established Gateway to Heaven Christian Center.

The center’s primary work – driven by the vision of Deacon James Bryant and his wife, Claudette – has been supporting ex-offenders as they transition from prison back into the community. Their signature program is a “suit drive,” designed to provide ex-offenders with business attire to aid in their search for employment.



(L/R) Pastor Johnson and Pastor Jones in front of their Gateway Town Center, Gateway to Heaven Christian Church. Photo by staff photographer, Ron Breaker.

Jones envisions the new church playing a major role in providing ongoing support for ex-offenders.

“The critical path for men and women re-entering the community out of prison is the first 30 days. We find that if they have a good spiritual focus, if we can get them anchored in a church, it helps change their whole mindset and improves their chances for success.”

It was his shared belief in this type of community outreach that inspired Johnson to come out of retirement to co-pastor the new church.

Good acquaintances for years, it was not until this past August when Johnson substituted as music director at First Baptist Church in St. Augustine – where McConnell is pastor and Jones is a member

– that the three fully realized their mutual passion for ministry.

Having retired as a full-time pastor six years ago, Johnson had eased into a life of guest preaching, mentoring, and working for the Jacksonville Network for Strengthening Families, a city organization devoted to community building. With the exception of contracting and then defeating kidney cancer, he was enjoying his life.

“Then comes Carlton Jones and shares with me his vision. I see the Gateway Center, and it immediately clicks: This can be something very, very special. We began to talk and pray and the spirit just put it right together.”

“God has given me the gift of persuasion,” Jones said with a smile.

In addition to his pastoral skills, Johnson contributes an extensive network of non-profit connections that he developed while working with the city, a gift for music (he plays 13 instruments) and a passion for teaching.

“We are not striving to be traditional,” Johnson said. “And for people in their 60’s, that’s a task! The thing that distinguishes us is our outreach.”

That outreach will include providing affordable housing, teaching financial literacy and building strong youth, family and married couples ministries. It will also mean making long-term commitments to the needy.

“What’s lost in our community is people reaching back to the folks that are down and then staying with them,” Jones said. “We’ll serve Thanksgiving dinner at a homeless shelter, but we won’t help to feed or serve them the rest of the year. Just think if we could transform that relationship to where we’re not just doing it during a season but we’re doing it every day.”

The focus on ministry also de-emphasizes the importance of a building and drives its pastors to take their message into the communities they serve.

“Ministry is about people, not about a physical building,” Jones said, noting that the church is nothing fancy, without pews and just regular chairs. “Our focus is to do more like what Christ came to do. To go where the people are. If you have a vision, God will give you the provisions.”

The church’s location at the Gateway Town Center, in one of Jacksonville’s most challenged areas, best illustrates that commitment.

“Ministry is about changing someone’s life. Christ is a change agent. I want to be known as a change agent,” Jones said.



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