

New Church Development

Church Ministers to Community Needs from Neighborhood Storefront

Thinking outside the box is exactly what the Florida conference had in mind when it established New Life Community Church in Jacksonville in 1997. The first new African-American congregation in almost 20 years, New Life was designed to serve an urban community that is in transition.

"We intentionally located the church in a non-traditional setting, so that we could be easily accessible to the community," says Pastor Candace Lewis. "Instead of a free-standing campus, our church occupies 10,000-square-foot of prime commercial space that is actually located in a shopping center," she explained. "We have chairs instead of pews in our worship area, but like other contemporary congregations, we offer a refreshing spirit-led worship that is structured for ministry in the new millennium."

The life of the church is integrally tied to the life of the community, Lewis says. "Our mission is to listen to the needs of the community and be a church in action, not just in word."

For example, with the assistance of a grant from the General Board of Global Ministries and other church and community partners, New Life Community Church began a community development ministry that serves the health and educational needs – as well as the spiritual needs – of its community.

Outreach programs include a holistic health ministry designed to educate parishioners on preventative measures for heart disease and other common health threats.

An HIV/AIDS component offers testing and counseling to at-risk patients.

The church's emphasis on programs for children and youth led to the development of a Saturday activity program called LUMAS for: Leadership, Unity, Mentoring, Arts/Academics

and Spirituality. Attendees learn life skills and participate in arts, educational and recreational activities all within the confines of a spiritually grounded setting.

New Life also supports an after-school program for local families during the week, with care and tutoring services provided. Like its community, the church operates on a seven-day basis because, as Lewis explains, "God put us here to make a difference in this community, and we have to stay focused on that vision."

Established in 1997 and chartered in 1999, New Life has grown from a core group of 27 members to more than 250 members. The General Board of Discipleship has designated it as a "training site" for other growing and/or developing African-American churches. According to Lewis, the church hopes someday to build a permanent facility to meet its ever-expanding needs.



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