

Where space is scarce and faith is great: Inside, and outside, L.A's storefront churches

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On a sunny Saturday afternoon, 17-year-old Demetrius "Soldier" Clark paces his corner, Vermont and Slauson in South L.A. He eyes the gaggle of people loaded down with shopping bags getting ready to cross and motions to his 15-year-old brother to get ready. Dominic Clark nods. Before the light changes, Demetrius pulls a wireless microphone from his sweatshirt pocket and puts it inches from his lips.

"Gang-banging is dead!" he yells. Necks crane to look at him. "Gang-banging almost killed me! Gang-banging almost killed my brother! I want my brothers in the gang world to know that there is another way."

The Clarks ride the bus from Inglewood to spend their Saturdays in front of Taco Bell "ministering to gang-bangers." Themselves ex-gang members, the brothers are now part of South Los Angeles's faithful.

Where space is scarce and the need is great, communities of faith gather both in the streets and in the nondescript storefront churches that inhabit nearly every other block in South L.A. Their names foretell what they offer to parishioners who say they have often been left out or left behind--Fruit of Life, Center of Hope, Greater Deliverance, Rivers of Living Water, Jacob's Ladder, Our Lady Queen of the Angels, King's Way, Greater True Light. These churches nourish the spirit and feed the soul, but they also sustain families, provide food, clothing and sometimes shelter, teach English, engage youth and integrate immigrants who often struggle to find meaning and comfort far from their cultures and families. Says one pastor, "It's our responsibility as a church to help fill the void in a lot of people's lives."

THE SOLDIERS

Demetrius is slim and tall with high cheekbones. His eyes are both defiant and warm, and he speaks with a sometimes-sad wisdom that is rarely found in someone who has spent less than two decades on earth. Dominic has a mistrustful smile and a friendly face. His rarely takes his eyes off of his brother.

"We're facing extinction," Demetrius says. "We're almost extinct off the face of the Earth because gang-bangers want to kill each other. Black men want to kill black men. Mexicans want to kill Mexicans. They're laughing at us because we're killing each other."

Demetrius and Dominic moved to Inglewood from Atlanta after their mother died of brain cancer. At 9, Demetrius says he idolized the gang members in his neighborhood. He became one of them when he was still a child, he says.

"At the time, I took all the anger I had and put it into gang-banging," Demetrius says. "I would start smoking weed, I would start drinking and I would start fighting. Because that's all that I knew. It was an evil spirit. It brought back memories of when I was 9 years old and my mom passed away, when I had to hold my mom in my arms because she was dead."

He says he laughed when one of his friends asked a local pastor to talk to him.

"I wasn't living in the spirit, I was living in the world," Demetrius says. "I laughed at him because he was a white pastor. But then he started talking to me, and I can't really remember what he was saying, but it was powerful. And he was telling me that gang-banging was stupid."

Demetrius started going to church, but he wasn't ready to give up gang-banging. He caused trouble, he says, and was asked to leave.

"I couldn't have cared less about church, I didn't even care about God."

When his best friend was shot while washing his clothes in an alley, Demetrius' fellow gang members didn't even tell him about the death or the funeral. He began to think about what the pastor had told him, he says.

"I went back to the church, and he opened the doors for me. I began to think, 'What's the point of this? What's the point of gang-banging?' It's going to kill you."

Demetrius and Dominic began going to Watts Powerhouse Church on Imperial Highway and Grape Street. They started their own Gospel rap group and call themselves "Young Soldiers of God."

"I nearly had my head busted open because of what I did in the streets. I almost killed my brother," Demetrius says. "Now my brother can stand up and minister to the gang-bangers."

THE BATTLE

It was her desire to see "if the grass was greener on the other side" that brought Ruby Edmond "through hell" and then to Vermont and Slauson on the same sunny Saturday.

"I came up in the church. I had a praying and fasting grandmother that basically prayed me in," Ruby says. Raised in Pasadena, she has a graceful smile and gray dreadlocks that she pulls back from her face. She's wearing a long skirt and heels and she speaks softly and deliberately. In her 60s, Ruby moved to South Los Angeles not too long ago.

"Down the road, I wanted to see if the grass was greener on the other side. So we all got caught up in drugs, partying, cocaine."

But her softness is all gone when she grips that same microphone at Vermont and Slauson. She paces the sidewalk furiously as she yells:

"So you found out he was cheating, he was creeping? He got a couple other women you didn't even know about," she laughs sarcastically. "He got a couple other children you didn't even know about," she yells at the line of cars idling at the stoplight. "But you know what, God is faithful. God is faithful to you. And he won't leave you. Hallelujah!"

She turns abruptly when she reaches the curb to address two passing pedestrians.

"You want to know what crack cocaine does to people?" she asks two young Latinos in the crosswalk.

"Your friends will turn you on," she says, lowering her voice. "But when you're messed up and when your pancreas gives out on you and your kidneys start acting up, when you're body starts failing, then they'll just walk off and leave you. They'll give you the first free hit, the first couple of free hits, but when you're really sprung, and they know you're really sprung, they're not going to give you anymore."

Two of Ruby's sisters, Frida and Janet, became addicted to crack cocaine in the 1980s. Ruby herself snorted coke until it took her, sick and weighing only 95 pounds, to jail. But like the light that now changes to let another line of cars file past her in the stop-and-go Saturday traffic, Ruby's life has also changed. Dominic and Demetrius stand just to her left, watching as she takes another giant breath.

"My pastor told me, 'Ruby, you're the key to your family. Whatever you do, don't stop praying for your family, don't stop fasting for your loved ones,'" she recalls.

She remembers watching as Janet's doctor removed her from life support.

"She couldn't speak. But I knew she was listening. I asked her, 'If you believe in the Lord, squeeze my hand.' And she squeezed it," Ruby says. "We all just watched her heart stop beating."

Ruby's sister Frida suffered from pancreas and kidney complications from smoking crack. Although Ruby tried to talk to her sister about God, she says it took Frida's dealer to show her He was watching over her.

"She came to me and she said, 'Ruby, God is good to me.' She went to the crack house with all the tubes up in her, she was very sick. And

the man said, 'Lady, you sick. You need to go home.' And she said, 'I got my money, I want my dope.' But he wouldn't give it to her."

"Because we have a praying grandma, God brought us out," she says.

She remembers, too, a friend she met on the street. Ruby later found out she had turned to prostitution.

"I saw her on the corner, her skirt up to here so she couldn't even bend over. She said, 'Oh Ruby, I don't want to do this.' And I just threw my arms around her right there and told her that God loved her." But it was too late. The next week they found her body in an alley."

When Ruby hands the microphone to Demetrius and Dominic, she smiles the way a strict "been there, done that" sort of grandmother might. She says hopes that their peers will hear their message.

"Gang-banging will take you out of here at a young age. Gang-banging will leave you in a wheelchair. Gang-banging will leave you crippled. Gang-banging will leave you with one eye," she says. "I know young men whose kidneys are all messed up, they're carrying bags on the sides of them because of gang-banging. And that's not the way. Jesus is the way."

Ruby says the reason she comes to this corner every Saturday is simple.

"When you find good dope, you're going to turn somebody on. When you find a good party, you want to say, 'It's happening over here!'" she smiles. "So now that I've found Christ, and I've found out that he's that real peace that drugs couldn't get me, that alcohol couldn't get me, that out-on-the-dance-floor couldn't get me, that different mates and partners couldn't give me, I want to come back and let the world know that Jesus is what you're looking for, He is what you're longing for, He's what you need, He is the answer. He is the only answer."

THE WARRIOR

When Reverend E. Wayne Gaddis invited those facing foreclosure or financial problems to come forward and share a special prayer with him one recent Sunday, more than half of his flock at Greater True Light Baptist Church filed down the aisle. His deep voice booming, Gaddis ordered his parishioners to join hands and "make the devil mad and talk to God about your situation."

With one hand, he wiped the sweat pouring from his brow with a fluffy gym towel as he extended his other hand to touch the foreheads bent before him. "Talk to him, talk to him, talk to him about your situation," Gaddis sang, the fingers of Greater True Light's blind organist fluttering across the keys. The congregation exhaled a deep "Amen." The bass guitarist, silhouetted against a large poster of the Ten Commandments, kept a steady beat as Gaddis crooned: "You don't know what you've done for me."

Nestled between Jefferson and Adams Boulevards. in South Los Angeles, Gaddis' church keeps its doors thrown open so that his booming voice can cut through the Sunday afternoon heat. Gaddis' sermon today is mostly about dealing with fewer jobs and foreclosed homes, but he hits on absent fathers, substance abuse and racism along the way. Unlike other services, Gaddis' preaching is fluid, taking on a life of its own as it leaves his pursed lips.

"The people in South Los Angeles, we as a race of black people, the church is really all we have," Gaddis says.

His voice cracks as he belts out another improvised hymn.

"Lord, we come to you today, we're going to get a better situation," Gaddis says. "We're going to release our suffering. And when we come out, God, we're going to be satisfied and we're going to have strength because you have made us perfect, you have established us and you have settled us. And we come to say we thank you today. Lord, in the midst of everything that we're going through, God, you have said all that you want to do right now is to just settle us. And we come to say thank you today."

Greater True Light has a host of ministry projects, Gaddis says. The church serves up community meals, organizes trips for its big youth group and takes new mothers under its wing through its mother's ministry.

But today, Gaddis has focused his efforts on launching his new prison ministry.

"We still have to take care of them, even if they did something that caused them to be there," he tells his congregation as the ushers pass around a wicker basket. "Regardless to how they got there, let's remember that this is somebody's children."

He pauses to look out at the packed pews, his eyes zeroing in on his grandson, 3-year-old Wayne Jr., who is pulling on his mother's earrings.

"Even though I don't have no children in jail now, I don't know what tomorrow is going to bring," Gaddis says. "I would like for someone to reach out to them when they get in trouble. Whether they are innocent or whether they are guilty, still, we got to have enough love to be able to reach out."

"I never forget the fact that it could have been me, it could have been my son or my daughter," Gaddis says. "But by the grace of God, they're not incarcerated, I'm not incarcerated. We've got to be passionate for people."

Gaddis says it is the church's responsibility to do what social welfare programs cannot or have not.

"I don't look for the local government to take care of those that are in prison," he says. "Jesus said, 'When I was in prison, you didn't visit me.' It's our responsibility as a church to help fill the void in a lot of people's lives."

More than three hours later, Gaddis sings his final note and the congregation calls out its last "Amen," but no one rushes out the wide doors. Instead, they linger--swapping stories, patting shoulders, kissing babies and urging each other to "keep your head up."

In his office, Gaddis settles into his chair and looks out over his desk that is covered with photos of his grandchildren, prayer requests and ideas he's scribbled down. How will his congregation make it through these tough times, he asks himself.

"In South Los Angeles and all over the world, it's midnight right now. But I have discovered, by looking at the time, that midnight only lasts for one minute. After that, at 12:01, it's a brand new day," he says. "And that's the way I live my life. I may have some midnight now, but it only lasts one minute. And 12:01 is a brand new day."

THE ARMY

On a sweltering May morning last year, 65-year-old Rosa Miriam Lopez stood giddily on a the corner of Vermont and 74th Street, clutching eight red roses and dressed in a billowing white wedding gown. Her husband of eight years by her side, López managed to cross only the threshold of the tiny Fruta de La Vida Church before bursting into tears.

"I always wanted to get married in the church, with God," she said, kneeling next to her husband before the altar. As three mismatched ceiling fans beat dust lazily around the crowded room, Pastor José Roberto Rauda tied the couple together with white satin ribbons to represent their marriage in Christ. Rauda's 18-year-old daughter, Milagre, burst into a Spanish hymn as she played the church's keyboard, her 6-foot-2-inch frame wrapped in red satin.

The congregation cheered as the "newlyweds" kissed then paraded out the door to the fenced-in parking lot. Folding chairs draped in lace and plastic tables with paper tablecloths welcomed guests as Rauda's wife served up chicken. The 5-year-old ring bearer, his suit two sizes too big, chased the horrified flower girl past an enormous pot of rice and beans simmering over a blue propane tank.

"My God is very important to me because I am his daughter. Without God, I would die," Miriam says. She fled El Salvador's brutal civil war in 1992, arriving in the United States without documents—and without her three children.

"It helps me spiritually even when we can't have good communication," she says of the church. "It teaches me about God."

On this cold March night, Miriam and eight other Central American immigrants wear their jackets inside the Fruta de la Vida Church so that Jesus' door may always stay open. Their breath hangs in the air as they repeat after the lector. Dressed in a red Old Navy polar fleece jacket and a white lace veil that covers her face, the lector, Doris, has abandoned the cane she uses to walk is kneeling with her forehead on the altar. For 20 minutes, she does not raise her face from the floor, only speaking in a constant stream of consciousness to God.

A junior drum set and a box of tissues adorn the modest altar, which used to be part of the split-level living room when Fruta de la Vida was just another South Los Angeles ranch home. Tonight, clusters of pink and white balloons hang from the ceiling and a party paper supply store-banner above the altar proclaims "Primero aniversario!" It is Rauda's one-year anniversary as pastor. A single Walmart space heater heats the room and uncovered fluorescent light bulbs light it.

"God tells us we can throw our sins to the depths of the ocean," Rauda says in Spanish.

"*Así es!*" everyone responds. "*That's the way it is!*"

"Now for the generous soul," the 63-year-old adjusts his slim reading glasses. "Generosity has the participation of the soul. A generous soul gives prosperity."

Rauda is also from El Salvador. In 1981, he was an officer in the army, fighting the guerrillas at the height of the country's civil war. He deserted and fled to the U.S. where he worked as a dishwasher and a gas station attendant before working for the P&F Textiles Co. in L.A.'s Garment District.

"I didn't decide to leave the *ejercito*," he says, "It was God. I left the army because I didn't believe in it anymore."

Four little girls, ages four to nine, run in and out of the room, clutching warm tortillas and shrieking in delight. Rauda smiles but does not pause as he reads a psalm.

"Nothing can come to me unless God sends it, right?" he asks.

"Amen!" they respond, their breath rising in the cold air.

"When I come to this country, I was a Christian," Rauda says. "But here I lost my path. I took drugs, marijuana, *cerveja*, *cigarro*. Jesus helped me get out of it. Now I feel good because God did a good job with me. And he gave me Milagre," he says, speaking of his daughter.

Rauda was a member of Fruta de la Vida for 14 years. When the former pastor left last year, he asked Rauda to replace him. Fruta de la Vida has 40 members, mostly immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Rauda pauses to talk about Saint Paul, the teacher.

"We're not ignorant, right?" he says. "We have the mind of God. But God also lets doctors, lawyers, engineers take the message of God just like us *pobres*."

Rauda speaks to his congregation as their friend. He is aware of the problems they bring him, he says, and he likes to teach the word of God in a small group like this one.

"If you earn a thousand dollars," he says, "One hundred is for God. Nine hundred dollars you take home for your family, the rest is yours."

Even in these tough economic times, Rauda's congregation nods approvingly. Money is tight and many support families still living in Central

America, but not one person hesitates before dropping their crumpled dollar bills into the battered velvet collection bag.

"I want more people," he says, "Every person who comes here is here because they need God, they need change. They have family problems, problemas con esposos, kids, money. They are here accepting God as the Savior. They start to learn a different life in God."

Rauda glances at a large clock on the back wall. Nine o'clock. Most of his parishioners go to work early.

"When you get up at six," he says—and the congregation laughs. He smiles and brushes his mistake aside, beginning again: "When you get up at five, tomorrow is another fight, another day. We always have war all the time. We have to get up, have our coffee, and look and listen. You have to win new victories."

"*Así es!*" they echo.

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YouTube Video Link

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