

Now playing in Peoria:

Inner-city outreach is more than just a sports dream

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY



Riverside Community Church meets in a building that used to be Peoria's Shrine Theatre, where everyone from Bob Hope to Gerald Ford had been on stage.

Pastor John King has a track record of turning mid-sized churches into big congregations.

He did it in England more than once. And in King's six years at Faith Christian Centre in Washington, Ill., the suburban Peoria church grew to 1,200 congregants from 350.

Subsequently, the innovative preacher began receiving invitations to speak at ministry conferences, where he urged pastors to get out of their comfort zones. In 2000, King says the Lord directed him to follow his own advice and plant a church in downtown Peoria.

The Welsh-born pastor had taken risks before. After all, he moved his family to Illinois because he sensed God directing him there even though he knew virtually nothing about the state.

With the blessing of Faith Christian Centre, King and 300

followers crossed the Illinois River to pioneer Riverside Community Church. Now 1,400 people show up for Sunday morning services at the 1,400-seat inner-city Peoria church.

Attendees meet in the former Shrine Theatre, which Riverside bought for \$550,000 (it had been for sale for \$3 million). The church has put \$1 million worth of improvements into the building. Early on, King didn't envision inner-city ministry as the focus of Riverside.

"At first I didn't think about helping the poor at all," admits King, 57. "But then a local black pastor challenged me. He asked, 'Are you just a suburban church that's going to meet in the city, or are you an urban church that's going to make a difference?'"

King realized for the neighborhood to accept a predominantly white transplanted congregation



A backpack giveaway of school supplies draws 900 local residents to Dream Center Peoria.

it would take more than simply opening the doors on Sunday morning. Members would have to take ministry to the streets.

In a step of faith, Riverside in 2005 played a pivotal role in purchasing the vacant eight-story YMCA building two blocks away for \$210,000 (negotiated from a \$1.8 million asking price.) King saw Dream Center Peoria as a way to partner with other churches and organizations to impact the neighborhood.

The top three floors of Dream Center Peoria are low-income apartments for single mothers, many of whom now attend Riverside. Another floor is designated as an overnight shelter for homeless women. Church offices are located on another floor of the 124,000-square-foot Dream Center Peoria.

This is a pivotal year of renovation. Remaining floors are being remodeled thanks to a recent \$1.5 million anonymous donation from a local businessman.

Dream Center Peoria has a separate board and is the outreach arm of Riverside and other area churches, including volunteers representing Willow Creek-affiliated Northwoods Community Church of Peoria and Trinity Mennonite Church of Morton. Secular organizations and businesses also are providing funds and unpaid helpers for Dream Center Peoria.

"They know we are faith-based," says King's son Andy, executive director of DCP. "We see ourselves as a spiritual hospital, and we're clear that we offer Jesus as the center."

In addition to providing recreation opportunities, the Dream Center by later this year will be a place where youth can receive tutoring help, fine-tune job-hunting skills and hang out in a cyber cafe. It will be a haven where women can learn how to sew, cook, manage finances and study English as a second language, all without being charged.

For now, 250 inner-city children and youth are enrolled in sports programs at the Dream Center. Some of the facility's venues are being operated as before, such as basketball courts, racquetball courts and a running track.

Andy King is enthusiastic as he leads a tour around the facility, envisioning the possibilities he is certain will become realities. For example, a room that now has just dust and broken pipes soon will be full of youth using Xboxes and iPods.

"The big thing is this will get kids off the streets," Andy says. "Gangs are one of the biggest employers in the city."

Ongoing Riverside and Dream Center Peoria programs already feed more than 500 families monthly in conjunction with a nationwide organization called Angel Food, supply backpacks and school supplies for 1,700 inner-city kids each fall, and give away appliances and furniture weekly to needy residents. Ambitious plans are on the DCP drawing board to turn gutted rooms of the edifice into everything from a technologically advanced library to a trendy store providing free clothing and toiletries.

John King has no delusions Riverside and DCP will transform the entire city. But he is confident the immediate area will be changed.

"We want to take one of the most crime-ridden areas and change it forever," he says. "Our goal is to make poverty history in at least one spot of the city."

The four-person DCP staff is hopeful of additional funds to hire personnel needed to implement all the plans. John says God has a way of providing funds to Christians who bless the poor. "The peace of God allays fears," he



Andy (left) and John King are leaders at the Dream Center and an AG church in Peoria.

says. "I'm not worried about the money. It's God's building."

Still, it's a long process to transform a neighborhood where the average annual income is \$5,353.

"Doing inner-city work is difficult," John acknowledges. "There are times when it would be easier to run away to the suburbs. Yet God has come through with miracle after miracle. It's serving the poor and broken in our community that keeps my heart from turning hard."

Riverside Community Church continues to grow, drawing a mixture of people: affluent and poor; urban dweller and suburbanite; black, white and Hispanic. A total of 54 people signed up for a February membership class, a decision that involves committing to join one of the church's 60 ministries.

That's part of John King's plans for parishioners to be missionaries to their city. On a Sunday morning in February, King preaches from Luke 4:18,19 and exhorts Riverside members not to coast from the time of salvation

until death.

"Between the cross and heaven Jesus expects us to be working with Him," proclaims King, who is a low-key conversationalist but a dynamic and animated preacher. "If you are a follower of Jesus, then His agenda is your agenda. And His agenda is the poor, the prisoner, the oppressed."

One of those reached is Deb Krigner, who lives four blocks from the church. She started attending Riverside after an Adopt-a-Block outreach. DCP has supplied clothes, food and furniture for the four children and 10 grandchildren who live with the 45-year-old Krigner in a two-bedroom house.

Krigner starts getting the children ready for the 11 a.m. service at 6. They all gather for breakfast at the Gathering Grounds Coffee Shop in the church basement before heading off to various classes.

"I used to be out there running, drinking, smoking," Krigner says as she sweeps up crumbs from the floor. "I don't do that anymore. I want these kids to follow the Lord."

Javier Trevino joined the Riverside and DCP maintenance staff in January. He, too, started attending as a result of Adopt-a-Block. But not right away. Sometimes he answered

the door with marijuana on his breath; other times he would hide behind his curtains.

"I used to keep company with prostitutes and crackheads," Trevino says. "I wasn't a very good role model for my kids, passed out drunk or snorting cocaine."

Visitors from DCP knocked on his door on seven different occasions before he relented. When he saw people from the church kneeling down praying across the street, it finally convinced the self-proclaimed prodigal to relent and come sit in the church's back row to listen to a sermon.

"Pastor John stepped on my toes — but I have a lot of toes," Trevino says.

At the time, Trevino downed 30 beers a day, seven days a week. He had tried to stop drinking alcohol for the sake of his kids, his mom and even himself, but to no avail. On a Wednesday night, he vowed to stop drinking — for the Lord. After a shaky Thursday, by Friday Trevino says he had no more desire to drink.

"The King of kings put my life together again," says the 58-year-old Trevino, who now participates in the Adopt-a-Block street ministry himself.

Such testimonies please John King the most.

"Riverside will never have a big bank balance," he says. "If people give money to us,

we will give it away." **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

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



Javier Trevino

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