Still hearing from God more than 60 years later

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The boy, not even yet a teenager, walked to the front of the church and began to talk from Genesis 6, how “It’s Gonna Rain.” Minutes later, an adult from the congregation came forward, falling between the chairs at the altar and crying about how he needed God to save him.

The man’s repentance confirmed the calling on the life of an 11-year-old Carlis Moody, answering the youngster’s prayer that if the Lord wanted him to preach, someone would be saved when he expounded on Scripture.

That was 1946. Two-thirds of a century later, that onetime youth is still preaching on the same north side of the Chicago metroplex, but touching lives stretching across the nation and around the globe.

“Sometimes we run into situations where supplies run out or we’re challenged by things, but I’ve learned from him to keep moving forward, God will work it out, just believe God,” testifies the Rev. Johnny McNair, who oversees almost 100 churches in South Africa for Bishop Moody, interim bishop of that nation as well as longtime prelate over Germany for the Church of God in Christ.

Moody as a young preacher was struggling with only a handful of members attending his Faith Temple in 1961 when he and a Brother Bonaparte were setting up for the congregation’s annual tent revival in their home of Evanston, Ill.

“I stood upon the platform, and I heard the Lord speak to me like I’m talking to you, and he said, ‘Son, for every seat you put under this tent, I’m going to fill it,’” the bishop recalls. “And I stopped and it shocked me because at that time I had never heard an audible voice like that.”

He immediately told what happened to Bonaparte, who asked him how many chairs he should put out. Moody, off the top of his head, said, “Three hundred.”

The Lord filled every last seat and touched off a seven-week revival that gave Faith Temple numerical increase and financial and spiritual stability.

“What has happened in the church (universal) is we have come to a place where we don’t really believe God is God,” Moody asserts. “We’ve got a God that the Bible does not show us. The God that the Bible shows us is a different God from what we’re projecting. He still speaks to people.”

The bishop is known best for his leading the Church of God in Christ’s Home and Foreign Missions Department since 1975. He’s ministered in 43 countries, almost as many as the total with a COGIC presence.

All Moody’s work overseas doesn’t mean he’s neglected the United States. A pastor since he was a teen, he founded Faith Temple on the basis of Hebrews 13:8 and Philippians 4:6-7 — that God still is alive, well and working in lives today, and the Almighty answers prayers of the faithful.
Those beliefs led Moody in 1980 to announce from the pulpit without warning that the church would open a Christian school within seven months.

He remembers that after the service, his wife, Mary Alice Moody, said to him, “But Honey, we don’t have no money, and we don’t have no staff, we don’t have anybody.”

His reply: “Oh, I know, but God said, ‘Start it,’ so he’s going to provide.”

Jerry Williams, who became Faith Temple’s board of trustees chairman, came along for the ensuing adventure. He accompanied Moody to the West Coast to see a pair of COGIC church schools and ask questions about how they functioned.

Williams’ wife then felt called by God to serve as the Faith Temple academy’s principal as she finished her doctoral studies. A pair of other teachers came forward to help, and Moody had a staff.

“The Lord just kept bringing all these people,” Jerry Williams says. The school opened Sept. 8 that year, right on time, and eventually enrolled almost 100 students.

Moody also has experienced adversity. He says neighbors of his church used to call the police on his people for supposedly being loud during his long-running revival, and the devil has come against his leaders’ families at various times. The congregation’s mortgage recently was imperiled when its bank said it was getting out of the church financing business.

However, each of those circumstances ended in victory for the bishop and his congregants. The key? Listening to the Holy Spirit. “The Book says he’s going to teach and guide us into all truth, but we’ve got to listen,” he says.

At 78, Bishop Carlis Moody Sr. still is hearing God — and the Lord still is hearing him.

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Crystal Cathedral shines more brightly as Shepherd’s Grove

Posted: Sunday, September 1, 2013 4:00 am

(Note: This is the first of two columns on “America’s Television Church.”)

The glass soars hundreds of feet into the Southern California sky, reflecting to onlookers the deep blue above. But the congregation that built the Crystal Cathedral under the leadership of the Rev. Robert H. Schuller has left behind the glimmer, shimmer and debt of its former home.

And, members say, the group is more alive than it’s been in years.

“We miss the building, of course,” says Sandra Jensen, 53, a member of the church for 22 years. “But you know what? It’s a building. The church is not the building. The church is the people.”

The congregation is now called Shepherd’s Grove and meets at the former St. Callistus, just down the street in Garden Grove, Calif., from the newly christened Christ Cathedral. The Protestant group essentially swapped facilities with the local Roman Catholic diocese, the change in locations taking place this summer.

The switch took place after a long-running drama at the Crystal Cathedral in which the founder in January 2006 gave way as senior pastor to his son, the Rev. Robert A. Schuller, only to take back the ministry’s reins 2½ years later as he cited “a lack of shared vision.”

Speculation over the tussle has been rampant. A former associate pastor under the elder Schuller says his old boss disliked his son’s more evangelical thrust.

That’s denied by the Rev. Bobby Schuller, the current lead pastor, who is grandson of the ministry’s progenitor and son of Robert A. Schuller. “I think the conflict was, honestly, two alpha males wanted to do church their own way,” he explains.

Robert H. Schuller left the church’s board in July 2011 in what some believe was an ouster, then unsuccessfully sued the ministry he began, seeking back royalties from his books and other works. The 86-year-old recently went home after hospitalization for elevated lactic acid levels.

A succession of people filled the pulpit until Bobby Schuller in January 2013 became speaker for the ministry’s morning service and much-watched “Hour of Power” television broadcast. The 32-year-old worked without pay until July, trying to help the struggling church climb out of a creditor-forced bankruptcy that, at its low point, saw only 300 people attending the 2,700-capacity Crystal Cathedral.

Attendance has climbed dramatically this year, with the 1,200-seat former St. Callistus nearly filled on a recent Sunday. “We’re much closer now that we’ve had tragedy happen to us,” says Elayne Alexander, 72, a member for more than 20 years. “The church is smaller now. We all talk to each other now, where we didn’t before because we were removed by so much space and room over there. We have more friends, more close friends, now, and I love it here.”
Many members credit the youngest Schuller’s leadership for the turnaround. To begin his congregation’s tenure in its new home, he preached a series on what it means to be a church, refocusing attendees on biblical roots of fellowship.

“God needs to teach us again what it means to be a local congregation of people that are doing life together,” Bobby Schuller says. To that end, he’s planning to start Bible studies, home-based life groups, and renew children’s and family ministries.

Well past 6 feet tall, slim and energetic, the always-smiling “Pastor Bobby” actually preaches to two congregations. Tree of Life came out of a merger of The Gathering, a church he started after leaving the Crystal Cathedral as college pastor, and Serrano Hills Church of Tustin.

Schuller’s two current churches last Sunday started sharing the former St. Callistus campus. “My understanding about Shepherd’s Grove is that everyone is so excited to have more young people on the campus, and Tree of Life is so excited because we finally don’t have to set up and tear down anymore,” Schuller says. Shepherd’s Grove has mainly middle-aged and elderly members, while Tree of Life is predominantly made up of those 20-40 years old.

Most Shepherd’s Grove services give Schuller the opportunity to welcome back old members returning to the congregation. “He’s a young pastor, and he is able to bring so many people together,” Jensen says. “Back together, because everybody was like lost sheep. And here comes this young man God had to send to talk with us candidly, (have us) ask for forgiveness, ask us to move on, ask us to support, and we said, ‘Yes.’”

Shepherd’s Grove suffered a setback Aug. 22 when the Roman Catholic diocese announced it would be dislodging Crystal Cathedral donors’ stones in a renovation at Christ Cathedral. But that news likely won’t stop Bobby Schuller and his congregation’s faithful.

They are not there — they have risen.

(Next week: Bobby Schuller’s spiritual walk as one of the nation’s premier millennial-aged preachers.)

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‘Preachers of L.A.’ showcases bling, bless-me culture

Kyle Huckins | Posted: Sunday, October 20, 2013 4:00 am

“You know the glory … but you don’t know the story,” says Bishop Ron Gibson, talking about himself and his fellow pastors — not Jesus — in the premiere of the Oxygen television show “Preachers of L.A.”

The opening sequence starts with a preacher’s hand sporting a huge ring filling the screen followed by high-dollar cars zooming past the lens amid audio from booming altar calls.

Billed as a “docu-series” by Oxygen — known for its female-oriented shows — “Preachers of L.A.” attracted more than 1 million viewers to its first program, one of the most successful premieres in the network’s history. The numbers from this month’s showing undoubtedly were helped by a couple of stories on Yahoo and other news sites centering on the controversy of temporally blessed clergy flashing their bling.

“The Bible says, ‘Above all, I want you to prosper and be in health.’ … I believe that,” says Bishop Clarence McClendon in quoting 3 John 1:2 as explanation for his prosperity gospel teachings.

The series is an interesting artifact of a rapidly evolving church culture in the United States. The program features five African-American preachers and one Caucasian, the weight in favor of the former perhaps due in part to both the show’s producers being black. The resulting depiction is of particular interest to me as a white preacher in a historically African-American denomination.

“Preachers of L.A.” does capture accurately a fair amount of black church life. All the pastors in the series are charismatic or Pentecostal, the way many (but not all) fellowships of African-American stripe tilt. There is an excitement about the gospel and life in general in the clergy and church members portrayed that definitely resonates with a black Christian population.

The first episode showcases Minister Deitrick Haddon’s comeback concert. Once a pastor in Detroit, Haddon’s marriage fell apart, then he fathered a child out of wedlock. “I absolutely did fall from grace,” he admits.

Now engaged to his child’s mother, Haddon wants the concert to restart his career in gospel music and ministry in his new home in California. He puts amazing pressure on everyone — including the show’s other preachers — to make the event a success.

“This is MY comeback concert,” he emphasizes.

His fiancee agrees: “We really need this to work.”

All the stress eventually does work, though not without a price, as Gibson gets huffy about Haddon telling him to rush an altar call at the concert so the comeback can continue.

“I was shocked when Deitrick told me to hurry up and get off the stage,” Gibson says.
The conflict is one of the few apparently genuine aspects of the premiere, which has many moments seemingly staged for the cameras. There are quite a few philosophical conversations between mates that a viewer would think rarely happen in “real life.”

There’s a little sexuality in the episode, courtesy of Pastor Wayne Chaney. Coming home, he gives wife Myesha a rather charged cuddle but corrects himself, saying that he needs to wait for what he was considering doing.

“You can be saved, sanctified and sexual,” he insists.

Bishop Noel Jones, the lone single among the preachers, has a scene talking with longtime “friend” Loretta Jones (no relation). She admonishes him for being too on-the-go with ministry.

“You don’t know when to shut it down,” she tells him after he brags of preaching to thousands in foreign venues.

And that’s the trouble with “Preachers of L.A.” The pastors are so hedonistic that they give the gospel a golden-edged tint that isn’t authentic.

Gibson is an official in my denomination, the Church of God in Christ. But I can tell you hardly any of my brothers in ministry can afford to live off what their congregations pay them, let alone have two large houses, a Bentley and other trappings of wealth.

Haddon’s focus on helping his own reputation is an exceptional turnoff. Christianity is not about us; it’s about Jesus, and him crucified, buried and resurrected. Everything else comes in a distant second.

Not surprisingly, theology is barely given a few seconds of “Preachers of L.A.” Gibson manages to talk about salvation to a group of very well dressed street gang members likely tipped to the taping. Outside that, the eternal gets little time.

Watching “Preachers of L.A.” isn’t a sin — but it won’t get you much closer to God, either.

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