

Pastor Follows King Legacy

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Change Christian Center in north Portland.

"We gather together, and we're strengthened collectively by each individual's faith," Strong said.

As a spiritual leader in Portland for more than 24-years, Strong said the church is a place to help everyone discover their true potential in life to make healthy and positive choices.

"What King was dealing with was racial inequality, and the people involved in the civil rights struggle all felt the pain of it," he said. "But it was their faith, and King's faith, that gave them the impetus to make change."

According to Strong, a lot of people talk of King as a great leader that he was, but sometimes forget he was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, and his faith in Jesus Christ was central in what he did.

"His sermons came out of scripture," he said. "It was a core part of who he was."



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Life Change Christian Center Pastor Mark Strong follows the legacy of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. by sharing the power of the church to bring hope and positive social changes to the community and members of his congregation.

As a graduate of Jefferson High School, Strong, 50, said growing up in north and northeast Portland was

different when he was young, especially regarding the rise in youth violence Portland has seen in the

past few decades. "There were some tough spots, but it isn't like it is now," he said. "And we would get in fights and then be friends the next day."

Strong also said he didn't always know he wanted to become a pastor.

"My goal was never to be a pastor whatsoever. I was thinking more business or athlete," he said.

One Sunday morning, however, when he was 19, Strong attended church to please his grandma's perpetual wishes.

"During the service, God gripped my heart," he said. "And I started weeping and crying."

He said he remembers saying to God in that moment, "If you want me you can have me!"

After experiencing such a radical transformation that day, he said his attention became re-focused from parties and girls to spirituality and scripture.

"I got a real hunger for prayer and the bible, and most of my time was spent reading scripture," he said. "And my heart began to have a real love and care for people—for all of humanity."

Like Martin Luther King's teachings of Agape, which translates to universal love for all of human kind, Strong said he also believes love is not only a central part of the church, but it also reminds people their existence has meaning.

"My passion was, I wanted to share with people this wonderful love Christ has put in my heart," he said.

"Like Agape, it is love for everybody. That is what it is about."

Strong said the embrace of community is one of the main reasons people attend church.

He said, however, the church must be proactive to help not only

those who are a part of the congregation, but also those who are not.

"One thing Jesus says, 'you are the salt of the earth, the light of the world'; but in order for the salt to be effective, it has to get out of the shaker," he said. "One of the things churches need to do is get out of the shaker and apply the salt where flavor is needed."

According to Strong, even the perpetrator never fulfills their potential as a human being.

"When slinging dope and shooting people—they don't reach their potential they were created for," he said.

And as a result, there is so much havoc and pain.

"The hardship it puts on a community and the terror people have to live in is ridiculous," he said. "Our burden and desire is, how can we mobilize the church in a simplistic, yet effective, way to engage problems in our community—specifically the violence."

In a proactive effort to bring positive change, Pastor Strong, along with several other pastors and churches from throughout the metro area, created the 1145 Club, which is aimed to help end gang violence amongst youth.

At a recent press conference to discuss the arrests of 31 gang members, Strong said, the hearts of members of the faith community were very much present with the crime issue.

He said, however, "It is not just about punishment, but prevention is equally important."

The name 1145 Club, which began a little over a year ago, reminds individuals they can spend one day, one hour or 45 minutes, to make a difference in each other's lives.

The group, which currently has more than 400 volunteers, grew quickly, he said.

The goal is to get community members to focus on at least one in four areas, by being there, sharing, caring or prayer.

Volunteers for the organization can be seen wearing bright green t-shirts as they walk through parks and hot spots where violence has been present.

"What I think is important is that everybody needs to remember they have something to give no matter how insignificant they feel it is," he said. "But it is not just Life Change, or one church. It must be everybody working together."

According to Strong, there is no way one church could do the work of the 1145 team.

"Faith gives you strength and another way to address and look at the problem," he said, adding that when everybody contributes, everybody is blessed.

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