



URBAN CURRENT

Son of a sharecropper

Years into white people rallying, conferencing, and writing books promoting racial reconciliation, I was invited to be part of a discussion group sponsored by the world's leading Christian journal. The conversation was recorded and photographed for the magazine cover feature. The subject was racial reconciliation among evangelicals. Present, but not in the discussion, was the publication's editor. During a break, I asked if he had ever visited Pastor Clay Evans and Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church.

"I don't believe I know who that is," he said. I felt like Ezra. "He tore his clothes, pulled his hair out and was appalled." I could not believe the editor of the primary evangelical journal on the planet lived and worked in Chicago and did not know the "godfather of the Black Church."

I confess, my respect for the man plummeted on the spot.

Evans stepped off the bus that carried him from Brownsville, TN, to Chicago in June 1945. Germany had surrendered. Japan's surrender seemed imminent. The 20-year-old was carried north by a burgeoning flow of black migration. He had a plan: go to a school of mortuary science, open a business, and live a life that never would have been possible for his sharecropper parents.

Vocally gifted, after not speaking a word for the first two years of his life, he turned down an opportunity to audition for Lionel Hampton. "This is not my plan for you, Clay. This is not what I want you to do," a quiet voice steered him away from a step toward a larger dream. Days, weeks, months of interaction with God led him to a conviction that God was calling him to pastor. He enrolled in Chicago Baptist Institute attending night classes for four years.

When Evans started the church, many of his peers were incredulous. "What are you doing?" they queried. "Why do you want to start a baby church? Just wait until one of these old guys die and take over an existing church."

In a south side funeral home with his sister, two brothers, and two friends, on September 10, 1950, Clay Evans founded Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church. One year later, he began the Fellowship Hour Broadcast. For 50 years they broadcasted live, opening with a paint-peeling rendition of "What a Fellowship ... Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." In 1959, with 2,000 members, the church bought a broken-down church building.

A dynamic leader with a burgeoning congregation, Evans was soon on the radar of the powerful white democratic political machine. Mayor Richard Daley extended gestures of friendship.

On Sunday, September 23, 1964, in the presence of 2,500 people, groundbreaking ceremonies were conducted for a block-long, million-dollar complex including a new auditorium annexed to the existing church structure. A huge loan from white financiers was promised.

In 1965, Pastor Evans met Jesse Jackson, a young civil rights activist, who introduced him to Martin Luther King, Jr. Evans was one of the first pastors in Chicago to endorse a King visit to Chicago.

Evans participated in one of King's first marches in the streets of Chicago. Evans was summoned to a meeting with the bankers who had promised the building loan to Fellowship. "Withdraw your support and involvement with King or your building loan will be stopped. We'll see to it that you'll never finish building the church." At that point, Evans had already spent \$150,000. Many of his peers counseled Evans to abandon his relationship with King. Evans prayed for direction.

He concluded that the conviction which led him to share in King's crusade was not changed by circumstances. To Evans, King represented an effort to open up jobs and options making it possible to live anywhere and to have access to better education.

By the end of 1965, construction on the new sanctuary structure ground to a halt.

For the next eight years the concrete foundation and a steel-skeleton super structure stood in mockery of Evans' convictions and the congregation's initial investments.

Years later, he talked with me of his conviction (he uses the word often) that he was doing the right thing, causing him to stay the course and go wherever the fight took him. He claims City Hall told the bank to cut the loan. Anybody who knows how Chicago works doesn't doubt that for a minute.

In 1971, with new winds blowing and political tides changing, the building loan for the church building was re-approved.

On April 15, 1973, Pastor Evans and the congregation marched into their new building. The people were proud of their pastor who stood up to the Irish Democratic machine, waited on God, and finally saw victory.

The congregation exploded to 5,000 members. The 200-voice Fellowship Choir became nationally renowned. Evans came into his own as a recording artist.

The bus ministry, youth ministry, Clay Evans Scholarship Fund, prison ministry, telephone counseling ministry, pantry, and television ministry all spoke to Evans' creative leadership, passion for evangelism, and persistent determination to make a difference in his city.

Evans retired at 75 years of age counting over 100 men called into the ministry under his watch.

The innovative son of a sharecropper cut a swath for God in a tough field.



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